

Restaurant owners, Southlanders help feed those in need on Christmas

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When she opened the door to find Efren Gonzalez holding a packaged turkey dinner, complete with cranberry sauce, pie and salad, tiny Lillian Pekar first smiled and then burst into tears.

“I’m all alone on Christmas,” she said. “I was just about to open a can of soup.”

The senior citizen, who lives in the Airway Mobile Home Park in Oak Lawn, said her son was supposed to come over but he’d recently suffered a heart attack.

“This means everything in the world to me,” she said between sobs.

Gonzalez, a Cook County corrections officer and local business owner, was so moved by the encounter that he had to pause before continuing his mission to deliver hot meals to the needy on behalf of Big Pappa’s Mr. Gyro’s restaurant in Oak Lawn.

“As long as I live, I will never forget Lillian,” he said.

It’s hard to say who was more humbled by the incredible display of generosity that took place at Big Pappa’s on Christmas Day, the givers or the recipients.

While most people across the Southland celebrated the holiday’s abundance at home, an army of men, women and children met at the fast food eatery to voluntarily cook, pack and deliver meals to

those less fortunate.

Spearheading the drive were Sandi DiGangi and Eddie Memishi, owners of Big Pappas. Last year, their first year in business, they gave away 700 dinners on Christmas Day. This year, the count topped 1,000.

“I believe very strongly in giving,” DiGangi said. Her three children, Anthony, 16, Michaelene, 13, and Nicolette, 10, spent all of Christmas Day and much of the week leading up to it getting things ready for the turkey dinner giveaway. They’ll celebrate their own Christmas in a few days.

A few weeks ago, DiGangi put up notices that Big Pappa’s was taking orders from needy and homebound residents in the Oak Lawn, Alsip, Hometown and Justice area for free dinners. She also went door to door dropping off flyers in the trailer park. Word spread and she also received requests from Palos Hills, Chicago and Darien.

To prepare the 1,048 dinners, she needed 56 23-pound turkeys, 10 cases of sweet potatoes and about 1,000 pies.

Volunteers, including Gonzalez’s daughter Felicia, manned the assembly lines.

Each dinner consisted of turkey, potatoes, vegetables, cranberry sauce and pie. Many recipients also received a loaf of bread, compliments of Entenmann’s.

Among the recipients was Frank Potter, of Markham. A laid-off carpenter, Potter said the past year has been a rough one. He was at Big Pappa’s to pick up dinners but when he learned he could also collect a toy for each of his three sons, he was elated.

“This is more than awesome,” he said.

Much of the food and toys were donated by local residents and companies, including Starbucks, Five Star Electronics, Whittingham Meats and the Oak Lawn VFW.

John Zawaski, of Oak Lawn, put out the word to the St. Linus Men’s Club and collected \$1,100 cash and \$3,000 in toys and coats.

On Sunday morning, Zawaski brought along his sons John Jr., Eric and Nick to help. His brother, Bill, was also there, helping with the mashed potatoes and stuffing.

Sarah Dynia, a Mother McAuley High School freshman, gave away 500 hand-stitched Christmas toys that she and her friend, Bridget Regan, made as a community service project.

After reading a Facebook post Sunday morning from his friend, Gonzalez, Dave Baez loaded his three daughters into the family car and left their Orland Park home.

“I figure my kids got everything they wanted for Christmas,” said Baez, a sergeant with the Cook County Sheriff’s police. “I want them to know not everyone is so fortunate.”

After their first round of deliveries, 13-year-old Kiana Baez said, while it was sad to know so many people needed food, being able to help “made me feel so good about myself.”

Gonzalez said the best part of the operation was being able to see needs met right here in the community.

Bill McCoy, an Oak Lawn firefighter, said he and his wife volunteered because it’s a feel-good experience.

“It’s so nice to see everyone helping,” he said.

Brian Placzkowski, a resident of the Airway Mobile Home Park, has been off work since a motorcycle accident a year and a half ago.

Alone on Christmas, Placzkowski said if not for the delivery of his turkey dinner, he’d probably be eating McDonald’s.

As a gesture of his gratitude, he handed Gonzalez a Christmas card to be given to DiGangi on his behalf.

“Everyone is so grateful,” DiGangi said back at the store as she opened the card. “It just warms your heart.”

Big Pappa's Mr. Gyros is at 10806 S. Cicero Ave., Oak Lawn, (708) 741-4014.