

Dinners help hundreds share in Christmas

Volunteers do their part to spread joy

ANDREA SANDS
Edmonton Journal

Mike Gouin celebrates Christmas Day with his wife and five kids at about 4:30 a.m. so he can get to Sacred Heart Church Hall by 6 a.m. to help cook 1,700 meals.

It means he misses most of his wife's Dec. 25th birthday and time with his kids, but Gouin has been helping prepare the Boyle Street Christmas Dinner for more than 30 years.

"It's like a Christmas miracle going on here, but it's too bad it only happens once a year. It should happen more often," said Gouin, 57, with tears in his eyes. "I get choked up sometimes ... Not everybody's born rich. Not everybody's born with the ability to have what we have."

More than 100 volunteers worked to prepare and serve about 1,200 meals Christmas Day in the packed basement of the church at 108A Avenue and 96th Street. Another 500 lunches were delivered to people in their homes.

It's a massive operation that served about 635 kilograms of turkey, 140 kg of ham, 160 kg of Christmas cake, 340 kg of mandarin oranges, 1,500 cups of coffee and more than 45 kg of candy, organizers said.

"We're the first ones that started this in Edmonton," Gouin said. "We serve the best meal though. We've got the best spread in town."

With the temperature outside at -23 C, a steady stream of people entered the church hall where bands played a variety of rock music and Christmas carols.

The festive meal started 41 years ago, when a man named Bob Preston decided to cook a couple of turkeys, said Lorne



JOHN LUCAS/EDMONTON JOURNAL

Eight-year-old Valencia Blue Cloud enjoys her meal during the annual Boyle Street Christmas Dinner at Sacred Heart Church Tuesday.

Hooper, who took over organizing the annual meal when Preston died.

"He had been down and out and had straightened himself out and decided to put on a dinner," Hooper said.

Jade Martel, 25, said she has been coming to the Christmas dinner for the past few years. She listened to the live music while her three young sons

played with their new toys.

"I just like it because of the people," Martel said. "I've been going to this church since I was a little girl."

Robert Damur, 60, has attended the Christmas dinner for the past few years and this year took on the role of Santa Claus. Dressed in a red Santa suit, Damur roved through the church hall with a big red bag,

cheerfully handing out bouquets of Tootsie Pops.

"Help yourself. Merry Christmas," he said.

It's the genuine warmth of the people attending the Christmas dinner that makes the event so special, Damur said. "The family's all gone in different directions and this is my Christmas Day. It's an emotional time, but it's simple."

The event has grown exponentially since it started with about 30 people, said Paul Boisvert, who is on the organizing committee.

"Christmas is important. It's special and this will be the only occasion they have to celebrate it," Boisvert said of the dinner guests. "Lots of them, they don't have a home or they don't have family here."

Another annual Christmas meal was served at the Edmonton YMCA downtown residence, which offers transitional housing to about 125 men and women and between two and five families per night. The annual meal started in the 1960s and is paid for by donations.

More than 5,000 people were expected to attend the 26th annual Christmas Day Dinner Tuesday evening at the Shaw Conference Centre. About 300 turkeys were prepared for the banquet that provides a hot meal, music, toys and clothes.

The annual event draws many people from the inner city, families who are new to Edmonton, single-parent families and people who make the dinner an annual tradition, said BJ Brahmacharie, community events director for Victory Christian Centre.

"I would say we have more people every year than the year prior," Brahmacharie said. "We'll have a live band and other live entertainment. We give away food hampers, clothes, the kids all get presents, there's also a whole kid zone with balloons, clowns, face painting. There's a giant inflatable obstacle course. We have a teen section with video games and pool tables, so there's something really for the whole family."

More than 400 people were scheduled to volunteer at this year's event, he said.

"I think it's really important because sometimes we forget in the busyness of life that Christmas can be a lonely time for some people," he said. "This affords them an opportunity to be together with community, be together with family."

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Card project promotes marginalized local artists

MEGHAN MAST

Edmonton Journal

Edmonton artist Jose Isabel Marquez Lugo struggled to find work after an accident at work paralyzed the right side of his body and left him with a serious brain injury.

Now, he creates art that is printed on greeting cards as part of a grassroots program that helps marginalized local artists share their work with the community.

"In this condition, not very many people give me a job. Art is my expression," Lugo said. "I am promoting myself, my artwork, but this is hard ... When I have help from some organization, it's better."

The program, run by Boyle Street Community Services, buys work from four local artists and prints it on greeting cards, which are packaged in sets of four and sold at several Edmonton stores for a minimum \$2 donation.

Lugo appreciates the help because he faces unique physical challenges. He is right-handed, but since the accident he has had to learn to paint with his left hand.

"There are) some limitations with the size," he said. "But my expression is the same and I am using very different medium forms."

Instead of using traditional paint brushes, Lugo paints with found objects like aluminum cans, plastic caps and thin piping. The painting featured in the art cards set is colourful and abstract, with a Jackson Pollack-like splatter design.

Agnieszka Matejko, volunteer art co-ordinator at Boyle Street Community Services, started the project because she wanted to do something to help artists promote their work.

She got the idea for the project one day as she was leaving the Princess Theatre and saw an Alberta Street News vendor selling cards.

All the proceeds go to fund art programs at Boyle Street

Community Services. With 2,000 card sets for sale around the city, there is potential to earn \$4,000.

Berger is eager to see how the program will grow.

"I think it could provide the seed for the next round if we think of doing cards again, or we might expand it to more artists," he said. "I think we'd like to reinvest (the money), either to continue the card program or the art program."

Matejko said it means a lot to her to know the money is going back to support art.

"Art has the power to give people a sense of why to get up in the morning," she said. "I think that a lot of people who became artists, became artists through some sort of trial, from feeling different."

The key to the program's success, she said, is accessibility.

"So many people say: 'I want to help the homeless or marginalized communities,' but they don't know how," she said.

"Here, you know what you're donating money to. You know where it's going and you know it's supporting the arts, and for only two dollars."

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LARRY WONG/EDMONTON JOURNAL

Jose Isabel Marquez Lugo's paintings are featured on greeting cards as part of a program where local artists share their work.