

The true meaning of Thanksgiving

CoverStory
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Local organizations demonstrate community spirit at the holiday

By SUSAN BLOOM • Correspondent

While households throughout LBI will be celebrating their many blessings with friends and family on Thanksgiving, a number of organizations and volunteers will be expressing their gratitude in other ways — by donating their time and resources to help ensure a happier holiday for those in need. Among these efforts, St. Francis of Assisi Parish will be organizing several activities as part of its annual Thanksgiving Project.

One major event will be the church's distribution of Thanksgiving baskets to 240 families in need, everywhere from Forked River to Little Egg Harbor.

"This year, we've seen nearly twice as many people coming to our food pantry as we have in prior years and, in particular, a significant increase in the number of new families requesting support for the first time," said Lori Tamaro, director of family support

services for St. Francis. "People are clearly struggling in this economy, and there is definitely a big need at the holiday. Overall, we do everything we can to connect them to the goods and services they need to maintain a standard of living."

St. Francis has prepared gift baskets filled with traditional

Thanksgiving dinner staples, including a turkey, gravy, potatoes, stuffing, canned vegetables and a pie, along with instructions on how to prepare the meal.

Much of the food either was donated or purchased with the help of monetary donations made to the parish, and the baskets were largely assembled and distributed by volunteers under the direction of St. Francis' Family Support Services department.

"Participants are very thankful for this help at the holiday," Tamaro says.

As part of its Thanksgiving Project outreach, St. Francis will host a holiday dinner for 100 participants at its Community Center in Long Beach Township on Nov. 25, organized largely through the church's Youth Ministry and coordinated by volunteers Theresa Valeriani of Cedar Run and Jen Larkin of Beach Haven Park.

As part of this effort, which has been conducted at the church for 14 years, younger members of the parish donate snack items such as cookies, raisins and candies for goody bags, while older youths and teens help

prepare and serve the meal, greet attendees and oversee table settings and cards.

Now participating in his sixth Thanksgiving community meal at St. Francis, Manahawkin resident Anthony Bucci, 17, will be assisting with meal preparation, table set-up and food service.

"Attendees are extremely appreciative of the meal," Bucci said, "and the feeling of giving back to the community is just exhilarating. I hope to continue to support the annual Thanksgiving meal and maybe to run it in the future."

Attendees to the meal also will enjoy a free raffle featuring prizes such as cookie jars and gift baskets.

St. Francis also will deliver roughly 100 Thanksgiving meals to homebound residents of the community.

In addition to St. Francis' outreach, many other religious organizations on LBI will engage in community activities for the holiday. Among them, the Jewish Community Center in Spray Beach and Holy Innocence in Beach Haven will distribute Thanksgiving gift baskets to those in need; Holy Trinity Church in Brant Beach has been soliciting Thanksgiving-related food donations since October.

For questions regarding St. Francis' Thanksgiving activities, call 609-494-8816, ext. 170.

