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Food, kindness and good cheer

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Mission's volunteers provide for area families in need

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ARLINGTON - The first volunteer arrived at 5:45 a.m., banging on the metal back door.

Tillie Burgin, director of Mission Arlington, opened it to find a large man standing there with 10 pies.

He would be the first of almost 500 volunteers to show up at Mission Arlington yesterday looking for ways to help. The South Street facility was packed most of the morning with volunteers, who received instructions, prepared food and delivered baskets of kindness.

For many years, Arlington's needy had been fed Thanksgiving at the mission. This year, the mission expanded the number of sites where food was served, Burgin said.

Volunteers also delivered food to many homes this year. Although some received hot turkey dinners in plastic foam trays, most were handed bags that contained a turkey, cans of vegetables, pumpkin pie mix and pie crust so the family could prepare its own meal. As of noon yesterday, the mission had delivered bags to more than 200 families.

Some of the volunteers have been helping at the mission for years, making it part of their Thanksgiving ritual. Others, such as Jackie Spencer, turned out yesterday for the first time after hearing appeals for help on the radio and reading about it in the papers.

"Usually, we go to relatives for Thanksgiving, but we didn't this year, so we thought we should help out this year," Spencer said.

She and her daughter Chessie, 13, cut slices of pie and lopped whipped topping on them at the Peach Street Community Church, one of the sites the mission served. Her other daughter, Tiffany, 9, dished out giblet gravy.

But whether they were old hands or novices, they worked with cheerfulness and diligence.

Burgin said she had several volunteers this year who said they had received food from the mission a few years ago. Now in better financial positions, they showed up to return the favor.

Burgin was grateful and thrilled with the turnout, but she also delivered a message that she didn't want ignored: Thanksgiving Day is not the only day Arlington residents should count their blessings.

"I tell them, 'We're here 365 days a year. People are hungry in the spring, summer and winter, too.' And I say, 'Where have you been?' " Burgin said.

Those who turned out yesterday gushed with excitement over the way they had chosen to spend their holiday.

John and Margaret Eichelberger of Kennedale arrived at Mission Arlington about 9 a.m. and were handed a bag of food, an address and a Mapsco page. They tried the house but got no answer,

so they returned to the mission.

They tried again a little later. This time, they heard dogs barking inside. Finally a woman came to the door in her bathrobe, and the Eichelbergers found out why she didn't answer the door the first time: Both she and the other man in the house are deaf.

"They were very, very nice people," Eichelberger said. "My wife and I wrote notes back and forth to them, and they just couldn't thank us enough. The woman was just very appreciative of everything. It gives you such a good feeling to help people who are in need like that."

John Thielman, 50, an Arlington resident who is the vice president of a consulting company in Dallas and a frequent mission volunteer, delivered a bag of food to a family of four. He found the refrigerator bare.

Although the family spoke broken English and he spoke no Spanish, Thielman managed to communicate with them that he was offering to buy them more food. The mother broke down in tears.

Thielman went to the Sack 'N Save and bought milk, cereal, bread and other staples, as well as Popsicles for the two small girls.

Frances Siu, 44, of Euless, said the family of four she handed hot trays to thanked her over and over, but said little else.

"They didn't know what to say, I think," Siu said.

Perhaps even kinder acts were by those who gave their time - and got not one word of thanks in return.

Larry King, 31, a theater arts major at the University of Texas at Arlington, found himself two hours from his home in Graham, so he decided to help out at the mission. He was given a special assignment: The mission had just sent hot turkey dinners to the Golden Door Retirement Center on Fourth Street, which houses mostly patients with Alzheimer's disease.

King was asked to bring a little holiday cheer. He filled up the room with a jazzed-up baritone voice, first with Happy Birthday to one of the residents, and then with old favorites such as Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby? and Come Rain or Come Shine.

Not one of the eight residents in the room joined him. None clapped.

But King caught the attention of resident Faye Overby. Jeannette Williams, Golden Door's manager, said Overby, 74, was the youngest of 19 children and the third to be stricken with Alzheimer's.

Overby can't talk and can't feed herself, but twice she walked over to King while he was singing and squeezed his hand.

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