

A Jewish blessing: Serving turkey, playing Santa for families in need on Christmas

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Michael Oshan and Susan Meyers, two of the founding members of the Congregation of Emeth's annual Christmas meal service, play Santa Claus and elf at St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy, Calif., Sunday, Dec. 25, 2016. The Morgan Hill synagogue has made it an annual tradition to relieve church staff so that they may be with their families on Christmas Day. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

GILROY — Festivities at St. Joseph's Family Center on Christmas kicked off with a Jewish blessing and ended with a visit from Santa.

The center has brought Jewish and Christian traditions together every Dec. 25 for a quarter-century — ever since a few members of the nearby Congregation of Emeth synagogue first offered to take over for the nuns who were handing out free Christmas meals to people in need. The idea was to give the church workers a break so they could celebrate Christmas with their own families, letting the task of preparing and serving the Christmas meal fall to people who don't celebrate the holiday.



Mike Stone, homeless since 1999, eats a Christmas meal at St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy, Calif., Sunday, Dec. 25, 2016. Members of a Morgan Hill synagogue, Congregation of Emeth, have made it an annual tradition to relieve church staff so that they may be with their families on Christmas Day. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

"It's just nice to give the staff the day off," said Denise Weyl, a member of the Congregation of Emeth who was serving food Sunday while wearing an elf hat complete with oversized, pointy ears. "It's become such a part of our culture that this is a big thing we look forward to every year."

About 150 people filed into the gym at the Family Center in Gilroy on Sunday afternoon, receiving plates piled high with turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie and eating on tables covered in red and green paper in the glow of a brightly illuminated Christmas tree.

Families took their pick from an array of donated winter coats and sweaters spread out at the back of the room, and as a final treat, the children received wrapped presents from Santa and his elf, who were played by husband and wife Michael Oshan, 69, and Susan Meyers, 72 — two of the original synagogue volunteers who started the tradition 25 years ago.



Susan Meyers, one of the founding members of the Congregation of Emeth's annual Christmas Day meal service, plays Santa Claus at St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy, Calif., Sunday, Dec. 25, 2016. The Morgan Hill synagogue has made it an annual tradition to relieve church staff so that they may be with their families on Christmas Day. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Sitting at a table with her family and friends, 9-year-old Airreahinsa Castile gasped when she tore the paper off her gift.

"I always wanted this!" she cried, clutching a "Hello Kitty" purse. "I'm so lucky."

Family friend Elva Fuentes, who brought Airreahinsa and her own children to the noon meal, was also feeling lucky. The event is a blessing for the 41-year-old Morgan Hill mother who used to be homeless, and without a little help, wouldn't have many presents at home for the children.

"It gives the kids an extra little bit of faith," Fuentes said. "I'm so grateful for this place."

Michael Stone, who has been homeless since 1999, said the food Sunday was about as good as the home-cooked Christmas dinners he had grown up with. To him, that's the key to the holiday.

"Christmas is food," Stone said, polishing off mashed potatoes and stuffing.



Michael Oshan, one of the founding members of the Congregation of Emeth's annual Christmas Day meal service, plays Santa Claus at St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy, Calif., Sunday, Dec. 25, 2016. The Morgan Hill synagogue has made it an annual tradition to relieve church staff so that they may be with their families on Christmas Day. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

While some volunteers served food and passed out gifts, Michael Kerner handed out jackets, helping children and families find something warm in their size.

"It will rip your heart out," Kerner, 63, said. "When we start seeing kids that are cold come in and put jackets on, it's pretty heavy."

St. Joseph's, originally founded as part of St. Mary Parish, provides food, housing and employment services to Gilroy-area residents and families in need. The group has been nondenominational since 1981, serving as the charitable arm of a local group of churches, businesses and individuals.

Some of the Jewish volunteers said they view serving on Christmas as a mitzvah — the Hebrew word for a good deed. So they donned festive red and green attire and cheerfully wished guests a "Merry Christmas" as they ladled cranberry sauce and passed out pumpkin pie alongside their fellow congregants and their wives, boyfriends and children. There were about 30 volunteers there from the synagogue, and they served 18 turkeys.

"It's a lot of work," said Congregation of Emeth member Geoffrey Jackson, "but when you see the end result, you go home with a really good feeling about it."



MariaElena Jarson, a member of the Congregation of Emeth, offers a warm coat to a man attending the annual Christmas Day meal at St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy, Calif., Sunday, Dec. 25, 2016. The members of the Morgan Hill synagogue have made it an annual tradition to relieve church staff so that they may be with their families on Christmas Day. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)