

Open Pantry Community Services host its annual “Christmas Meal”

Instead of opening gifts with family members, more than 300 people gathered at Open Pantry

By Tashanea Whitlow

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass (WWLP) – Christmas dinner is a family tradition for most people. It allows family members an opportunity to catch up and share some laughs over a meal. But if your homeless, Christmas dinner takes on a whole new meaning.

Instead of opening gifts with family members, more than 300 people gathered at Open Pantry Community Services in Springfield to have dinner with people they now call family. Open Pantry Community Services hosted its annual Christmas Meal Friday. The pantry prepared almost 800 meals, with more than half being delivered to needy individuals and shut-ins.

One thing that unifies people here is the true meaning of christmas, which is giving back to those less fortunate. Volunteers and servers came in all sizes, colors and ages. Everyone thankful for their blessings and wanting to pass that good energy on to the less fortunate.

Food server volunteer Stephanie Aleixo of Ludlow told 22News, Christmas is about giving. “The meaning of Christmas to me, is just giving and being with your family and friends. It’s me and my friend here today, with her mom and we just really wanted to help people who don’t have a family, friends or just a place to go.”

Empty nester Rona Hockett of Springfield, told 22News it won’t be her last time having dinner at Open Pantry. “I don’t have my kids anymore or family to cook for, so I just came to hang out and socialize.”

Holiday Meals Coordinator Robert Maurice has been preparing meals at Open Pantry for more than 35-years. Maurice told 22News he’s not upset about not spending the holidays with family, because he’s gained a new family at work. “The whole group. These people became my family, because that’s the name of the game “How can you help others?”

George Larou knows all about helping people. While volunteering at a shelter, he noticed homeless children weren't getting enough milk, so he decided to donate it. "Bringing milk to the homeless and less fortunate. Its just something you ought to give back to the community, because I love people," said George Larou of Life Church in Hampden. Larou told 22News he's been donating milk to the Open Pantry for more than 10 years.

Open Pantry Board Member Terry Maxey says he wants people to know the true meaning of Christmas, which is extending your hand to those in need. The holiday meals program is funded through the generosity of the public.