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NEWSMAKER

'It's almost a miracle'

Volunteer helps make church's Christmas gathering a place of comfort and caring

BY JENNIFER TODD
Staff Writer

For Phil Capp, Christmas is about family — about being together, making memories and sharing in the joy of the season.

It's also about tradition.

Since his children were young, Capp and his family have cut short their own Christmas morning festivities to share the holiday spirit with attendees of the annual Christmas dinner at St. Anne Catholic Church in Lancaster.

"We've been doing this as a family for almost 20 years, and I can't imagine spending the day any other way," Capp said. "There's no place else I'd rather be."

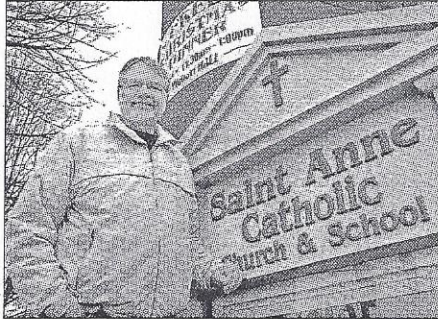
This is the 21st year that St. Anne is offering free Christmas meals to the public. The church originally served a Thanksgiving dinner but decided to switch the event to Christmas because so many other organizations offered a Thanksgiving meal.

Over the years, Capp said, he has helped at the event in just about every capacity — setting up, cleaning up, serving and manning the dessert table.

One year, all he did all day was take out the garbage.

But for the past five or six years, he has coordinated transportation for the event, which last year drew about 600 people.

He fields calls from people needing a ride to and from the dinner and



Dan Marschka / Staff

Phil Capp finds joy in the St. Anne Christmas meal.

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also makes sure meals are delivered to those who prefer to eat in the comfort of their own homes.

About a half-dozen volunteers will help with transportation this year.

Last year, volunteers delivered 60 to 70 meals and transported close to 40 guests to the event.

As for the rest of his family, wife Ginny will answer the phone at home in the event of last-minute callers needing a ride, daughter Margaret, 21, will help at the dessert table and son Stephen, 18, will handle the transportation with his dad.

"As a whole, we have a great team of people who make this event work," Capp said. "We've all been doing this for so long, we've figured out a lot along the way."

In fact, the operation runs so smoothly that the Capps usually are back at their Manheim Township home by 3 p.m., he said. The family then celebrates with friends in

Mount Joy.

"It's almost a miracle, this event," Capp said. "It comes together quickly, people show up, have a meal and the whole time everyone has a smile on their face. And the volunteers, they're all so generous with their time. Any one of us would do anything that's needed to make this day a success."

Capp said that one of the most fulfilling aspects of helping at the dinner is meeting people with whom he wouldn't normally cross paths.

"Over the years you start to see — now these aren't all St. Anne's people who come to the dinner — you start to see many of the same faces," Capp said.

"I go to (Central) Market often and I see people downtown who I've picked up or sent meals to and we recognize one another and it's — it's neat because you meet people you probably never would have otherwise.

"Unfortunately, you don't have the opportunity (during the dinner) to sit down and really get to know them, but ... it's humbling, because

some of them don't have a lot. I think they enjoy just getting out and talking to new people."

When he's not helping to plan St. Anne's holiday feast, Capp, 62, works as a stage manager and stagehand.

Involved in the entertainment industry for 30 years — since getting his start at Fulton Theatre — he's worked on corporate events as well as rock shows at Hersheypark Stadium.

This year's St. Anne Christmas dinner will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the church at the corner of North Duke and Liberty streets.

Transportation to the church is available by calling Phil Capp at 393-8962 from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. by Thursday.

Those attending are asked to enter the church from the parking lot area off North Duke Street. The dining facility is not wheelchair-accessible.

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