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Masons to serve Christmas meal

Volunteers cook, serve and clean, while others deliver meals to the homebound.

 By KRISTIN SENTRY
 REGISTER CORRESPONDENT
 December 23, 2004

Each Christmas Day, for two decades now, a group of area Masons has served several hundred free dinners in an event that has been dubbed the Jerry Marsengill Christmas Dinner.

Named for its founder and former Mason Jerry Marsengill, the dinner provides an opportunity for individuals in need to come together for fellowship on Christmas Day. It is organized each year by the Masons of Central Iowa.

"Jerry wanted to do something for the homeless and needy, where there was a place they could go for a little festivity and a good meal," said south Des Moines resident Bud Erickson, who now serves as the general chairman for the dinner.

The meal includes turkey, stuffing, potatoes, gravy and pie. Dinners are served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Scottish Rite Masonic Center, 519 Park St. Volunteers at the site cook, serve and clean, while others deliver meals to the homebound or provide transportation to those who have none.

"In years prior we served up to 1,000 dinners, but 20 years ago we were the only ones in town doing this," Erickson said.

He said they now serve around 400 meals, since there are a number of other venues offering the same type of service. "We're glad to see so many other places where people can now go," Erickson said.

"The most amazing thing is how much volunteer help we get," he added. About 70 people typically sign up to assist annually, and he said many families bring their children as a way to begin teaching the importance of helping others.

"There's a lot of organization that goes into this, and everyone feels good doing it. It's something good for the community and a way to give back."

Des Moines resident and Mason George Robinson has been helping with transportation for the dinner for the past seven years. He said several local car dealerships and human services agencies loan the group vans, including one that is handicapped-accessible.

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Christmas dinner

The Jerry Marsengill Christmas Dinner will be served from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the Scottish Rite Masonic Center, 519 Park St. Free Christmas dinner and transportation provided.

For information on volunteering, contact Bud Erickson at 285-0880.

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"Most of the individuals who come to the meal don't have a family here locally. It's nice to see a lot of the older folks enjoying Christmas with a hot meal and a few simple gifts," he said.

Robinson and his wife, Darlene, typically spend Christmas Eve with their own family, and then make it a tradition to help out at the meal site. "We just enjoy it, and I think a lot of people are very appreciative," he said.

Erickson said Marsengill was a noted Masonic scholar, a writer with a journalism degree from Drake University, and a member of Mensa, an intellectual exchange group. The meal was named in Marsengill's honor after he passed away in 1992.

"There are 27,000 Masons in Iowa, with 304 constituent lodges, and we try to encourage them all to get involved in assisting the community," Erickson said. He said a similar dinner is held in Ottumwa, and a program in Cedar Rapids provides clothing for children in need.

Erickson is proud of the work done by the Masons of Central Iowa on behalf of the annual dinner.

"Come on down and we'll show you a good day of fellowship and friendship," he said. "We try to send everyone on their way with a good feeling."



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