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"Students, Volunteers Join Forces To Provide Holiday Meals For Homebound Seniors"

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In a flurry of crayon scribbles and marker doodles, first-graders in Janice McLachlan's art class decorated cardboard carrying trays last week, transforming them from simple boxes into personalized presents for homebound medical patients and senior citizens across Long Island.

As of earlier this week, East Quogue Elementary School students had decorated dozens of the trays with pictures of turkeys created by tracing their hands, and thoughtful notes for those families who will receive their Thanksgiving dinners on the trays.

The customized creations were part of a collective effort to raise the spirits of some of Long Island's less fortunate residents. The Hampton Bays branch of the Dominican Sisters Family Health Service will be delivering holiday meals prepared by Suffolk County Community College students in the trays decorated by East Quogue Elementary School students. In total, more than 150 senior citizens from East Hampton to Lake Ronkonkoma will be receiving them. Jackie Tapley, the Helping Hands coordinator for the Dominican Sisters in Hampton Bays, said the group has been providing meals to clients of the group's Helping Hands program and long-term nursing patients, for the past 15 years. She noted that many of them are older and, oftentimes, are unable to leave their homes.

"It's just that many of these seniors live alone," Ms. Tapley said. "Their families are a distance from them, or they don't have anybody. They don't drive anymore, they can't cook anymore, really."

"Those are the people that we're targeting," Dominican Sisters Development Manager Marianne Bogannam added. "Those who would not be able to have this meal otherwise." Dominican Sisters is a certified in-home health care group that provides assistance to the sick and elderly. It boasts offices in Manhattan, the Bronx, Westchester County and inside the St. Rosalie's Roman Catholic Church Parish Center in Hampton Bays. Staff members and volunteers help elderly and disabled customers by doing light housekeeping, running errands and assisting with their other non-medical needs. Last year, the Dominican Sisters had students from the Hampton Bays Middle School decorate the trays, which were donated by Classic Beverage in Hampton Bays, but this year the agency recruited students attending the East Quogue Elementary School, where Dominican Sisters development assistant Christine Alford's son Jack attends classes. Classic Beverage once again donated the cardboard boxes. "We are appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the program," East Quogue Elementary School Principal Robert Long said. "Helping others that are less fortunate is an important lesson for the children to learn, especially at this time of the year. The students really enjoyed making a difference and helping to brighten someone's holiday." Ms. Tapley noted that when the group first began providing the Thanksgiving dinners, volunteers for the organization were preparing them. Six years ago the group got in touch with the then-newly formed Suffolk County Community College culinary program and those students took over the cooking responsibilities.

Chef Vincent Winn, an instructor at the college, said that though the process is time consuming "requiring six to eight hours of preparation work on Tuesday and another six hours of cooking on Wednesday" he's had no problem gathering 25 to 40 student volunteers each year.

"This time of year it's always good to help those in need," Mr. Winn said. "I feel good "I feel good that kids are doing it and we're all able to give back."

This year his students will prepare a dozen 20-pound turkeys, 100 pounds of mashed potatoes, 50 pounds of sweet potatoes, 80 pounds of stuffing, 25 pounds of assorted vegetables, as well as 36 apple and pumpkin pies.

All of the ingredients and food was purchased using money raised by the Dominican Sisters, with funds coming in from community members and various groups, such as the Hampton Bays Lions Club.

"It's really unlike any other effort I've ever seen because it really collaborates with the entire community," Ms. Tapley said. "From kids in the school, to volunteers in the community, to this agency, students at the colleges, even the local supermarkets giving us a discount on the turkeys."