



Baltimore builder dishes out turkey

For 14th year, Swirnow stages basket giveaway for needy

By Mary Gail Hare, The Baltimore Sun

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Many employees of Swirnow Buildings Systems reported for work Saturday, but they won't be at their desks or in the warehouse. Instead, they will help to provide turkey dinners to as many as 17,000 needy residents in Baltimore and as far away as southern Pennsylvania.

This marks the 14th year that the family-owned company in Baltimore has sponsored its Adopt-a-Turkey program, distributing food baskets to more than 60 nonprofit organizations — a list that has grown annually.

"It is really a family tradition started by Richard Swirnow and carried on by his son, David, today,' said Tim Ratajczak, company spokesman. "We brace ourselves for growing numbers every year."

The Swirnow giveaway is more like a party for employees and other volunteers who show up at the 28th Street location to help, said Ratajczak. Years of practice make the job go like clockwork, and the weather has always cooperated, he said.

Students at a private school in Northern Virginia put together the baskets, which are actually large cartons, for the company. They pack each with a 15-pound or weightier turkey, 10 pounds of potatoes, canned vegetables, cranberry sauce, rolls and a dessert, all the ingredients needed to make a Thanksgiving feast. The cartons fill several large Swirnow trucks.

Employees start early, unloading, sorting and counting, and they stay until the last carton is on its way.

"This just fits in with our idea of giving back," said Ratajczak. "It's an idea that we try to instill in employees from the top on down."

By noon, experience says, a caravan of station wagons, vans and pick-up trucks would line up at the gates, all set to deliver the goods to churches, schools, community organizations and shelters. Some organizations will receive as many as 60 cartons; others need fewer.

"These boxes mean the world to the people getting them," said Becky Foster, director of the Family Crisis Center of Baltimore County. "The gift is so generous with enough food to feed several people. All we add are recipes."

The domestic-violence shelter will pick up about two dozen boxes and give them to several former residents who are struggling to re-establish their lives. When one single mother picked up a basket last year, her 9-year-old gushed over the gift, Foster said.

"This wasn't about candy or a new toy," Foster said. "This little boy was truly excited by a box filled with food."

At Aunt Hattie's Place, a group home for teenage boys in the city, the boxes will mean a great meal for 17 "really big eaters," said Diane Pruitt, administrative specialist.

"We have volunteers lined up to cook turkeys and all the fixings," Pruitt said. "We are so appreciative of this generosity."

Sandy Plains Elementary School in Dundalk will collect 25 baskets from Swirnow and another 80 from various other companies, like the Lafarge Corporation, as well as area churches.

"These gifts and the kindness and generosity of others mean a lot to our community," said principal Harry Walker. "We have a lot of families facing challenges because of unemployment, and it's heartwarming to see so many folks stepping up to help."

Donna Sullivan, the school's guidance counselor, expected to be distributing baskets most of Saturday.

"There is such a need here, and our families are so appreciative," Sullivan said. "I wish the givers could see and hear the stories and the thank-you's."