

Sharing More Than a Meal

“People just don’t invite other people over for dinner anymore,” Share-A-Meal Coordinator Linda Koranek observed recently. Most folks now meet at restaurants to save the labor and mess associated with home cooking. It is easier, right?

Those who are north of age fifty probably understand what she is talking about. A home cooked meal takes planning and effort, while hectic schedules make it nearly impossible to have the whole family together in one place.

Society increasingly relies on restaurants to do the cooking. In fact, the online research hub, Statistica, reports that households in the U.S. spent \$745.61 billion in 2015 on food and drink. It is staggering to think that almost 19 million people ate at a full-service restaurant in the spring of 2016 and over 49 million people opted for fast food during that same period. Long gone are the days of sharing family dinners with friends and relatives, or are they?

The Shenandoah District Disaster Auction is offering the opportunity for an amazing array of dinner party choices this year. The Share-A-Meal booth will be at the auction selling tickets to dinners on May 17-18 at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds. For people who did not grow up in a home where home cooking and lots of family and friends reclining together around the dinner table was a regular occurrence, a chance to savor this experience—without having to do the dishes—is possible.

The way Share-A-Meal works is auction-goers pay anywhere from \$20 to \$65 per ticket to experience a home cooked meal prepared by a host family located somewhere in the District. The dates, times, locations and menu are displayed at the booth, so buyers can choose something that fits their schedules, interests and taste buds. At the appointed date and time, the hosts will welcome you into their home and provide not only a meal, but a dining experience. Beyond the obvious gastric delights and friendships that develop, the money donated for the tickets supports teams of volunteers who go into disaster areas and help rebuild homes.

Who are these intrepid people who offer to host complete strangers in their homes on behalf of disaster ministry? They are people who enjoy cooking and are excited to meet new people. One such team is comprised of Janet Good and her sister, Wilda Holsinger. These two have been hosting three-hour dinner parties for twelve for more than five years. They serve a four-course meal with shrimp cocktail appetizers, salad with homemade poppy seed dressing, meat, vegetables and pies crafted in their homes from scratch. Pies are their specialty, especially coconut cream and pecan.

Why would they work this hard to host dinners year after year? Janet says, “We enjoy it, but mostly we do it to remember and honor our dad.” Their father, Harold Wampler, was one of the first people in the Shenandoah District to organize trips into disaster areas to provide relief (See article below for more about Mr. Wampler’s work).

What do they get out of doing dinners? Wilda says they “Enjoy cooking and meeting and talking with different people.” Janet adds, “It is fun to see the people from the dinner at the auction the next year.” Sometimes, they get to see their previous guests back at their dinner table because some folks are repeat customers and come back year after year.

Camala Kite involves her Mill Creek Sunday School class in hosting dinners. She says the whole plan begins in January. The class picks the menu and the date, usually the third Saturday in September. They offer to host eight people in Camala's home and serve a variety of things from meatloaf to salmon to barbecue beef brisket and four types of desserts. Gary(?) Cline often provides his famous brisket for the meal. As a special treat for their guests, children from their family or congregation at Mill Creek will come along and play violin or other instruments as the entertainment for the evening. Eight volunteers commit to bring dishes and act as servers.

Is it hard to do? Camala says, "It's not all that involved. All you have to do is plan the menu and get good help involved and set things up." The volunteers set the table and while the guests are eating, the volunteers eat together in another room and serve the various courses. They have been doing it for ten years or more and the best part about it is meeting new people from the church and from the community.

Keith and Diana Zirkle of the Wakemans Grove congregation got in on the hosting last year. They had previously purchased tickets to other dinners and decided to host six people at their home. One couple traveled from Briery Branch to attend. Keith said they only knew one couple prior to the event but enjoyed getting to know new people.

On a perfect summer evening, diners were served a home cooked fried chicken dinner, complete with vegetables grown in their own garden. Later, the conversation was so good, they lingered and sat on the porch to enjoy the outdoors. Keith summed the experience up this way, "Good food. Good fellowship." That is a winning combination.

Lee and Regina Harlow of the Mountain View-McGaheysville congregation heartily agree after their first experience hosting a Share-A-Meal dinner. The Harlow family offered their guests—a group of women who were friends—the unique experience of dining on dishes made from a plant-based cuisine, such as Thai peanut noodles and grilled vegetable salad. But more satisfying than the food was having the experience. Regina admits, "I'm a huge believer in community and connections." In fact, the best part of their experience was meeting an entirely new group of people.

She did have some hesitation about signing up as a host family, though. With young children, Regina stressed a bit about when their schedule would be clear and how clean her home would remain before the diners arrived. However, she found her guests were not judgmental about any of the things that stressed her earlier but were patient with her children and very kind. In fact, they sat out on their porch and watched the children play after dinner. Regina observed, "There's vulnerability here; the people hosting have to be vulnerable enough to open their home and the people have to be vulnerable enough to purchase tickets. Vulnerability leads to new friendships and our family was blessed."

The Harlows and Zirkles were not the only rookies. Last year, Eddie and Linda Major of the Blue Ridge Chapel congregation volunteered to host up to ten people and encouraged four couples from their church to fill the chairs. The group dined on a "country meal" of baked chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and ended with strawberry shortcake and ice cream. Guests were also treated to the musical stylings of Jimmy O., who volunteered to perform. Later, everyone talked and played "old games" such as Dominoes.

As a member of the Disaster Ministry team, Eddie recognizes the benefits of the Share-A-Meal program. He says it is a wonderful experience where people have a great time, and to top it off, it is a good fundraiser. The best part, Eddie says, “is meeting people you don’t normally fellowship with.” He encourages people to buy tickets and “Be open to going to a different home and making yourself at home; it’s a different feeling. It is such an unforgettable experience that you will want to sign up for two or three more meals after you experience one.”

Briery Branch congregation’s Leonard and Rhoda Sauder are naturals at hosting Share-A-Meal dinners. Raised “horse and buggy Mennonite,” Rhoda knows how to cook and loves to do so. In fact, she and her husband do some catering on the side.

In 2018, the Sauders hosted two Share-A-Meal dinners. The first featured Mississippi Pot Roast, steamed, spiced shrimp, spinach and baked mashed potatoes. The second offering was “breakfast for dinner.” Guests were served bacon and eggs, sausage gravy, country ham, Swiss sliders, monkey bread and fresh fruit.

Party games ensued after the meals, including the Saran wrap game where the ball of plastic film they had to unwrap was as large as a basketball. They also played guess the Bible character name pinned on your back and the left, right game where gift bags are passed left or right, depending on the words in a story. Rhoda writes her own stories for this game.

In 2017, the Sauders did not plan to offer two meals, but ended up doing so when the first meal sold out and some friends wanted to be together. While the plans were being made for a second dinner, some other people at the auction “paid it forward” and purchased the tickets for the friends to attend.

Looking back on all the dinner parties she and Leonard have hosted, Rhoda remembers, “I didn’t know any of those people, but I enjoyed meeting different people.” Her advice for anyone considering hosting a dinner is to remind everyone that, “Nobody bites—we’re Brethren, for Pete’s sake!”

More than one hostess said the exact same three words when asked about their recommendations for hosting. Rhoda, Regina and Janet all agree people should, “Just do it!” If you want to join them, contact Linda Koranek at lkoranek@gmail.com, or call (540) 923-4173.

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