

‘Christmas Day at Pitt’ gathers community for free meals, clothes and gifts

By Spencer Levering, Senior Staff Writer

From holiday decorations to songs from the Salvation Army’s band, Gabby DeMarchi said during Christmas Day at Pitt, “the spirit is there.”

“Towers and The Eatery are kind of turned into a little mini Christmas wonderland in a very lovely, joyful way,” DeMarchi, assistant director of community affairs, said.

The Eatery will be filled with food, community members and holiday cheer on Dec. 25 as the University celebrates its 18th annual Christmas Day at Pitt. The event, which will last from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., will provide free hot meals, hot chocolate and winter clothes to anyone who comes, as well as a free gift for every child 18 or younger.



TPN File Photo

Christmas trees in Schenley Plaza.

“You can come in and get a hot meal, you can sit next to your neighbors, you can meet new people, you can connect with Pitt colleagues and you can get a present and get warm accessories,” DeMarchi said. “Pitt will be here for you on a day that sometimes people don’t have a space to go to.”

An expected 100 volunteers will help package 3,300 meals, according to the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs, more than doubling the amount of meals packaged from last year’s event. The Salvation Army and other community partners will distribute the meals throughout Hazelwood, Homewood and the Hill District. People over 18 who are interested in packaging food can register to volunteer on Dec. 18 or 19 through PittServes.

Another 150 volunteers are expected to serve meals, give gifts to kids and keep the dining and winter clothing areas tidy on Christmas Day. Jose Perez Vela, sustainability director for Pitt EATS, said they are planning to serve “about 500 meals.” The menu includes turkey from a local farmer, a decision made to “make sure we’re supporting the local community first,” according to Perez Vela.

“In terms of environmental reasons, we want to ensure we’re reducing our carbon footprint, and by doing so we want to try and support local farmers that are ‘just down the street,’ rather than pulling turkeys from across the world or across the nation,” Perez Vela said. “We pride ourselves on helping the community as much as possible.”

Perez Vela added that any leftovers from the event will be frozen and donated or distributed to the community through 412 Food Rescue.

Nick Pagano, marketing director for Pitt EATS, said Christmas Day at Pitt is an opportunity to “enhance people’s lives and experiences through food.”

“The holiday times — it’s a great time to really take that message and create an event around it and give back,” Pagano said. “Since a lot of different places are closed on Christmas, I think that it’s important to also create this access point for people who might not be able to find a meal somewhere.”

Justin Dandoy, director of community affairs, called volunteering on Christmas Day “a fun family affair.”

“Our Pitt partners and Pitt staff ... come to volunteer, and they oftentimes bring their kids or teenagers or whoever to come help out as well,” Dandoy said.

Community members interested in helping on Dec. 25 can sign up to volunteer through PittServes.

In addition to food, Christmas Day at Pitt will provide free winter accessories such as coats, hats, scarves, gloves, socks and mittens for attendees to try on and take home.

"People that attend can go through ... select what they like, try it on, make sure it fits," DeMarchi said. "Find what style works for you, what color works for you, and take what you need."

Along with clothing donations from individual community members, True T Pittsburgh, Color Me Urban and the Urban League Young Professionals will also supply the event with coats, according to DeMarchi.

Dandoy added that they're accepting clothing donations, but reminded people to make sure the items they donate are good quality.

"If folks do want to donate hats, gloves, scarves, things like that, we're happy to take those in addition to any gifts that folks would want to donate," Dandoy said. "The expectation is that we're giving out new stuff, and so that's something that folks will want to consider as they make their donations."

Gift drives held by 19 different University departments, offices and Pittsburgh-area organizations will provide every child at the event with a free gift. Additional gifts will be distributed throughout Oakland, the Hill District, Homewood and Hazelwood. Community members can donate gifts until Dec. 15 to 710 Alumni Hall.

Dandoy, who is organizing the collection and distribution of gifts, said he expects "over a thousand" gifts to be given out.

"If you want to contribute ... you can bring a gift for a child, you can wrap it or you can not wrap it, whatever works for you, and you could drop it off right in our office," Dandoy said. "We're happy to add that to our overall gift drive."

When donating a gift, Dandoy recommended thinking about the needs of middle schoolers and teenagers.

"It's fun to buy toys and gifts and stuff for little kids, but we want to make sure that we provide things for everyone," Dandoy said. "If you're wanting to donate a gift between now and the time this event happens, that's something you could always consider."

To Dandoy, the highlight of Christmas Day at Pitt is the opportunity to provide the Pittsburgh community a way to grow closer.

"Those folks come in for Christmas Day at Pitt, it doesn't matter who they are," Dandoy said. "They can get a gift, they can get the accessories, they can have a meal with us. There's no expectations or requirements for the day for folks coming — it's just about the chance for us to build some community."