

Boys and Girls Club attendees receive free Thanksgiving dinners.

Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD -- Even before you walked into the Boys and Girls Club, you could smell it.

Turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, bread, corn.

It was a Thanksgiving Feast, and though the Friday night event was six days in advance of the official holiday, for many of the children it was a chance to appreciate good food and good friends.

"I think what's important here is this is their Thanksgiving," said Gary Lopenzina, a member of the club's Board of Directors. "We don't ask who needs dinner -- we say, 'you want Thanksgiving dinner? Then come on over!' "

This tradition -- offering free Thanksgiving dinners to Boys and Girls Club attendees -- has been with the club for 10 years.

Ask any chef, and they'll tell you feeding more than 70 elementary and middle-schoolers is no easy feat. Ardell Arsenault, of Pittsfield, the club's cooking teacher and unofficial "mom-of-all-trades" assembled the feast with her husband, Tom, as well as nearly two dozen high school "senior leaders."

"If a kid is well-fed, they do better in their sports, they tackle their homework better, they play better ... if they're hungry or their tummy aches, it isn't good," Arsenault said. "But if somebody talks to them for five minutes, and you give them something warm in their stomachs, they can be your best friend for the next 10 years."

It was clear by the rapid disappearance of the turkey and mashed potatoes that the children agreed.

"I like that people take the time to make it for someone," said Tyrell Council, 11, of Pittsfield. "And it's really good."

Of course, the Senior Leaders said the best part of the experience was working with the children.

"I can remember every [Thanksgiving dinner] I've ever gone to," said senior leader Samantha Barbarotta, 16, who had been going to the Club since age 5. "It's such a great feeling to see them so happy, even though we're doing something so simple."

Arsenault agreed, saying that through the years, the most important part of these dinners was to just show interest in the children.

"It's fun to watch them grow, take different interests -- love life, heartbreak, excel in sports," she said. "It's all about watching them grow up."