# Fred Beyer ready to step down after putting on 22 feasts for senior citizens

Since 1991, Fred Beyer and friends have put on a Thanksgiving feast in Cedarburg for senior citizens.

What started with about two dozen people enjoying turkey and stuffing prepared by Beyer and side dishes made by his family and friends has grown into a feast for as many as 175 people. It has moved to various locations to accommodate more people and now is served at Webster Transitional School.

Last Sunday, Beyer presided over what could be his last local community meal, an annual event that has earned him accolades.

Beyer and his wife Leslie plan to move to Ellsworth, Maine, to be closer to their daughter and twin 3-year-old grandsons. Their Cedarburg home is for sale.

“Carol (LaFontaine) will be taking it over. She does most of the work anyway,” Beyer said.

LaFontaine, director of the Cedarburg Senior Center, has been Beyer’s assistant almost from the start, but there is no doubt Beyer’s charisma has inspired people to step forward.

Most of the food is donated by Olsen’s Piggly Wiggly in Cedarburg, including eight 20-pound turkeys cooked by the grocery store’s kitchen staff on the day of the feast.

“The turkeys get done as Fred pulls up in his van, and we load them in. His van must smell really good,” owner Ryan Olsen said.

“We have the easy part. It’s Fred who does all the running around. It’s another way to give back to our community, particularly to the seniors.”

Beyer used to get food donations from a variety of places until Layton Olsen, Ryan’s father, offered to supply everything.

Beyer used to find people to prepare the turkeys, often having to instruct them on how to roast the birds. After a couple of miscues by home cooks, Layton Olsen told Beyer his staff would cook the turkeys.

When the event was held at the Senior Center the first couple of years, Beyer used to stand in the serving window and carve the turkey, putting on a bit of a show.

Now, members of the Cedarburg Lions Club arrive with aprons and carving tools to do that task.

When Beyer was ready to sit down to eat with the seniors the first year, he said, 80% of the people had already left.

“That’s when I decided we needed to provide entertainment,” he said.

He approached Cedarburg High School, and the jazz vocal ensemble now performs. The Cedarburg Civic Band also plays at the event.

In addition, 25 high school students participate through the school’s community service program. Dressed in black pants or skirts and white shirts with black bow ties, students serve food, greet guests, set the tables and clean up afterward.

The foods class and other students make quick breads for the meal, and elementary students decorate placemats.

“Many of the Seniors love this personal touch and often ask to take any extra placemats home with them to decorate their homes or rooms at Lasata,” said Patty Clapper, community service teacher.

“Our kids love the interaction with the seniors from our community. It’s really fun.”

Of course, a Thanksgiving meal would not be complete without pumpkin pie.

On Friday, 30 pumpkin pies were made by members of Boy Scout Troop 836 and their mothers, a tradition that started seven years ago.

“We cheat and use roll-out pie crust, but the pies are made from scratch by the boys and their moms,” said Susan Grosskopf, the troop’s community service coordinator.

“It’s evolved into a really cool event, something the moms and kids look forward to each year. The boys learn some baking skills, and it’s for a good cause.”

Last year, the troop started a crazy hat contest for the pie-baking event. The Scouts also made centerpieces while the pies were baking.

Beyer always visits during the pie-baking event to thank the Scouts.

The pies used to be made by the Cedarburg Junior Woman’s Club. One year, the women decided to also make cranberry walnut pies.

“They were really delicious, but they learned that wasn’t a good idea. Everybody wanted to try both, and it took twice as long to serve,” Beyer said.

Until this year, Beyer made his family's secret stuffing recipe. The key ingredient, he said, is Bell's poultry seasoning available on the East Coast, where he's from.

He would chop the onions and celery and break up the day-old bread he got from Olsen's. Ryan Olsen offered to cut the ingredients and convinced him to use packaged bread cubes.

This year, Beyer turned over his recipe to Olsen's staff, who prepared it along with the turkeys. The stuffing passed his taste test.

Olsen's also supplied the mashed potatoes, gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberries and green bean casseroles.

"It's controlled mayhem," Beyer said. "Somehow, it all comes together. I worry like hell that it won't come together or we'll run out of food, but we never do."

Beyer, who was the mayor of Cedarburg from 1988 to 1991, decided to put on the Thanksgiving dinner after cooking turkeys for his Milwaukee church's holiday meal for several years.

"The first year, they served ham and scalloped potatoes. What kind of Thanksgiving meal is that?" he said. "I told them I would cook and stuff the turkeys. It started with two, then three, then five. I got to thinking there must be people here who don't get a Thanksgiving meal."

He decided to put on the holiday feast the Sunday before Thanksgiving because it would be easier to get volunteers.

Beyer wanted to provide the meal for free, but LaFontaine convinced him to charge something.

"If you give tickets for nothing, there is no knowing how many people will show up," Beyer said.

Tickets are $4 for Cedarburg senior citizens and $6 for others. People come from throughout the county.

The money collected is split three ways — Cedarburg High School for its community service and music programs, the Cedarburg Civic Band and the Cedarburg Lions Club.

Beyer presided over Sunday's feast like a proud father. It was a little bittersweet, but he said he's ready to let go, confident that the tradition will continue.

"I was hoping it would last five years. I can't believe it's 22 years," Beyer said. "I think it would be fun to make a surprise guest appearance sometime."

Image Information: PRESIDING OVER HIS last Cedarburg Thanksgiving meal, Fred Beyer will turn over the job to Carol LaFontaine, director of the Cedarburg Senior Center. They were surrounded by Cedarburg High School students who help with the event.
Photos by Sam Arendt