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DAILY SOUTHTOWN

# Tradition of preparing turkey dinners at Chicago Agricultural Sciences School carries on despite pandemic

By Mike Nolan

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Diego Delgadillo, left, and Evan Calhoun, students at Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, prepare Thanksgiving dinner for seniors on the city's Southwest Side. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

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Typically on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the gymnasium at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences on the city's Southwest Side would be filled with hundreds of senior citizens enjoying a traditional holiday meal.

With the COVID-19 pandemic making such a gathering impractical, students at the school carved turkeys Monday that would be part of meals delivered Tuesday to seniors in Chicago's Beverly, Morgan Park and Mount Greenwood communities.

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Nineteenth Ward Ald. Matt O'Shea, talking to students as they prepared to slice into the 17 turkeys, said "many of these seniors will spend the holiday home alone."

O'Shea said nearly 80 volunteers, some of them students at the school, would deliver about 400 meals.

Like other schools in the Chicago Public Schools system, the Ag High School, 3857 W. 111th St., is in remote mode, and students volunteered to come in to prepare the meals.



Roosevelt Gillespie, a senior at Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, works on a turkey for meals to be delivered to homes of senior citizens in the Beverly, Morgan Park and Mount Greenwood communities. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)

Helping those seniors enjoy their holiday is part of the reason students such as James Gross, a senior, took part.

“Seeing how much we can help the community and being able to give them a nice warm meal is very inspiring to me,” said Gross, 17, of Chicago’s Washington Heights community.

Evan Calhoun, 17, who lives in Morgan Park, said that there were challenges with brining and making the turkeys. He and fellow senior Diego Delgadillo, 18, of Mount Greenwood, sliced one turkey for a cluster of television news cameras.

Imani Jefferson, a 17-year-old senior from Washington Heights, said making the meals was a learning experience for her.

“I had never really prepared a turkey before,” she said.

The turkeys were raised at the 78-acre Agricultural school in the Mount Greenwood community, tended to during the pandemic by Shane Blake, who attended the school as well as Southside Occupational Academy. Pumpkins that were being used to make pies for the Thanksgiving meals

were grown at the Ag school.

“We got the turkeys almost at the start of the pandemic,” said Alexandria Pledger, an instructor in the school’s food science and technology section.



James Gross, right, cuts a slice of pumpkin pie as Sandra Munoz preps the container. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)

Other meal ingredients such as mashed and sweet potatoes, stuffing and cheesecakes are being donated by businesses and were to be delivered for final assembly of the meals, she said.

While helping prepare the meals, something the school has now been doing for eight years, earns the students credit, “a lot of them want to give back to the community,” Pledger said.

Each year, on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the students would have prepared and served the meals to senior citizens at the the school, she said.

“We would usually have 400 to 500 seniors here,” she said.



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O'Shea said there is a list of seniors who've attended past dinners at the school, and volunteers have, during the course of the pandemic, kept in touch with older residents to see how they are faring.

"Many of these seniors, regardless of the pandemic, would have been alone at home in front of the television" for the holiday, he said.



Matt O'Shea, Alderman of the 19th ward, talks to students at Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences while they prepare Thanksgiving meals. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)

Roasted turkeys sat in large foil pans as Diego Burgos, head chef at Smith Village retirement community in Beverly, and Isagani Alma, lead cook at the facility, prepared what Burgos described as an assembly line procedure for pulling apart the birds, each weighing in at roughly 20 pounds.

No conveniences such as electric carving knives were on hand, with students grabbing large carving knives to handle the task.

"We will separate and white and dark meats for each meal," Burgos said.

At Smith Village, he said, they will prepare and serve three meals a day for the community's 250 residents, and will make cornbread stuffing to accompany the turkey dinners.

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