



York establishments open doors to seasonal workers

Churches among those to open doors to youths



COURTESY PHOTO Sponsored by the York Diversity Forum's Seasonal Worker Program, the dinners included a traditional Thanksgiving dinner on Aug. 13, complete with turkey and all the trimmings, provided by members of First Parish Church.

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Opinion

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With the summer season drawing to an end, the dozens of students from foreign nations imported to York to work in the area's restaurants, inns, hotels and motels are heading home. Many local businesses count on them to fill jobs that would otherwise go begging for lack of local workers. They're brought here through agencies that specialize in recruiting them in countries such as Lithuania, Russia, Serbia, China, Romania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Uzbekistan and Poland, and placing them in York and hundreds of other tourist hotspots all around the United States.

They're intelligent, hard-working, unassuming, pleasant young men and women, almost all college students back in their home countries. If you have had the opportunity to meet and get to know any of them, you've probably been very favorably impressed. But what of their impression of us? What will they be saying to their families and friends — and the agencies that recruited them — about the people they met in York, the Americans?

Recognizing this challenge, the York Diversity Forum created what they call the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP), a collaborative effort involving community volunteers, the Chamber of Commerce, the York Public Library and First Parish Church. Their goal is to create a welcoming environment for the workers, to look out for their interests, to provide aid and support to those who may be in need, and to try to convey to our visitors that Americans — at least those in York — are a warm, friendly, caring, hospitable people.

They established a donated-bicycle free-loan program, and produced a welcoming information packet designed to enhance their personal experiences in the York community.

As more and more volunteers got involved, the program quickly grew. Larry Cassidy, for example, offered rides to and from work for those who were being housed far away from their job sites. And that evolved into providing transportation to and from Portsmouth and the malls for occasional shopping excursions. Several SWP members offered rides as well, and also took students on sightseeing trips to Boston and even Acadia National Park. Work schedules prevented some from going, but many of the workers gratefully accepted the offers.

As the social chairman of the SWP, Carol Rholi came up with an idea for a series of free dinners, hosted by area churches, to provide an opportunity for the students to meet and socialize with each other as well as to get to know some real York people, and vice versa. She approached the churches and got an overwhelmingly positive response.

The first dinner was held on July 2 at First Parish Church, with members providing decorations and a potluck dinner, serving it as well. That was followed on July 15 by another provided by members of Union Congregational Church, and included free take-home books and popcorn at each table donated by The Kettle Boys. Rev. Pat Smith said, "We offer several dinners a year as fundraisers, but doing this dinner made us feel that we were doing the real work of the church. What a wonderful experience it was for all who participated."

A third special dinner at United Methodist Church on July 29 featured grilled beef and ham, and even included plans for bocce and croquet, and although it rained, the guests enjoyed a great evening, as many members of the church joined the fun.

On Thursday, Aug. 13, the First Parish Church hosted another lavish meal, this time a traditional Thanksgiving dinner with turkey, stuffing, and all the trimmings, including pumpkin pie. The idea was to give the visiting foreign nationals the experience of something reflecting the American heritage (a brief lesson on the history and significance of Thanksgiving was included).

"The Thanksgiving dinner was an extraordinary, stunning event and a lesson in true generosity, warmth and hospitality. The First Parish folks certainly made a lasting impression and exemplified the best features of our community," said SWP member Susan Glick.

The final event of the season, hosted by St. George's Episcopal Church, was the only dinner during the summer that wasn't held in church facilities, but rather at the beautiful York Beach home of Charlie and Mary Ann Smith.

In addition to the dinners, there was an ice cream social at the York Beach Fire Station, with ice cream donated by Brown's, and a social mixer at Inn on the Blues, at which Joe Lipton turned his place over to the committee and donated wait staff, clean-up and beverages.

Now with the tourist season nearly over, the students who haven't already departed are about to do so. Their experiences in York were far from perfect, but they are returning to their home countries with some special memories, many new friends and, quite likely, a positive impression of Americans — at least the ones they met in the community of York.