

Dartmouth's Stanley Levine has brought Christmas dinner to many for 43 years

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DARTMOUTH — Stanley Levine's Christmas Day starts every year at 8 a.m. picking up meals to serve at a local church dinner for those who don't have anywhere else to go.

Levine, who is Jewish, said it's a chance to help Christians enjoy their holiday.

"Well, I've already had my holiday so it's time for you to have a good time," he said.

Born in New Bedford and living in Dartmouth for the past 40 years, Levine, 66, said he volunteers because it's a family tradition — his parents did it, he did it and now his children help serve the annual dinner when they are home.

The current co-coordinator of the 43-year-old tradition, Levine has been named The Standard-Times 2013 Dartmouth Man of the Year for his efforts. Nominations for the award came from the community and members of the newspaper staff. Recipients were selected by a newsroom committee.

"I am honored to be nominated," he said.

The Christmas dinner was begun in 1971 by the late Jacob "Jack" Gould, according to The Standard-Times archives. It is sponsored by the Jewish Federation and Coastline Elderly at the Holy Name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in New Bedford.

Levine said he was a Boy Scout, a Rotary member and active with the Dartmouth Youth Activities Association. He is also vice president of both the Tifereth Israel Synagogue and the New Bedford Jewish Convalescent Home.

A longtime volunteer at the Christmas dinner, he has been co-chairman of the event since 1996 along with Ellen Hull.

"It's been 17 years," he said, surprised. "Seems like only yesterday I was driving people back and forth to the meal and now I am in charge."

"Stanley arranges for the meals through the sheriff's office each and every year," read one nomination. "He sends out letters for donations and makes numerous contacts to make sure this all runs smoothly on Christmas Day."

With about 50 volunteers helping out, Levine said they start setting up around 8:30 a.m. at the Mt. Pleasant Street, New Bedford church. They prepare 160 to 180 meals, serving about 125 and delivering some meals to folks who are homebound. The guests start streaming in by noon, along with Santa Claus, Levine said.

The dinner is open to anyone who wants to attend. Levine said they mostly serve the elderly but also see a few families.

"We don't turn anyone away," he said. "Anyone who needs a meal on Christmas Day is encouraged to come by."

Although most people register for the meal with the Council on Aging, walk-ins are welcome. Everyone leaves with a gift and a bag of fruit, cookies and baked goods, Levine said.

Amir Cohen, executive director for the Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford who participated in the meal this year said, "It is a fantastic tradition for many in the Jewish community to be involved in making this special day better for those in the community we live in who are less fortunate. It is not a religious holiday for Jews but 'tikun olam' (repairing the world) never stops."

For Levine, who said he has not missed a single year, it's "just a way of giving back."

"I don't like to see people being alone on the holiday when we have so much to offer. And it just makes you feel good to do something this time of year," he said.

The Rev. Robert Oliveira said the meal, held at Holy Name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for a decade, has been "a wonderful gift" to the community and has given many a welcome place to go to celebrate the holiday with friends.

"To me it's the highlight of Christmas, it really is, because it highlights the season of giving," he said. "They provide the meal and the companionship that's so comforting. We are really blessed as a community to have them do this."