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Celebrating diversity

By: M. English , For The Sunday Edition



Wearing ethnic dress is one way that staff members, from left, Edele Kloss, Fatimah Moore, Alphonso Wisseh and Barbara Ode celebrate diversity during Meadow Springs Center's Heritage Day. Photo by Dana Welsh/Star Photographer

Food helps Meadow Springs employees share traditions

They do lunch - not dinner - but the noted 17th century diarist would get no argument from employees at Meadow Springs Center for Post Acute Care in Plymouth Meeting. Staffers at the Germantown Pike nursing facility are a veritable United Nations of ethnicity, culture and personal pedigree, but they've found plenty of common ground in a recurring event they call Heritage Day. According to Meadow Springs Human Resources spokesman Dawn Welsh, members of the facility's Employee Recruitment and Retention Committee got chatting about their diverse backgrounds at a meeting early this year. With roots in Ireland, Germany, Italy, Jamaica, the Philippines, Africa, China, Trinidad, and a whole host of other places, their collective provenance was undeniably global. "So, we started talking about how interesting it would be for everybody to bring in some dish that (reflected) all these different backgrounds, and people really like the idea," Welsh explains. The resulting potluck didn't disappoint. The eclectic feast included everything from spaghetti to pork and sauerkraut, black-eyed peas and Jamaican jerk chicken and became an instant hit. "It was a huge success," Welsh says. "People loved it, and everybody was excited about doing it again. The idea of dressing in native costumes...or something related to people's background came up, too. The plan was to do it every three months or so."

Time hasn't diminished the Meadow Springs colleagues' enthusiasm. At a recent Heritage Day, Art and Music Therapist Edele Kloss' embroidered red and white dirndl reflected her German roots, while nurse Bonnie Vample was vibrant in an African dashiki she'd borrowed from Welsh, and the latter sported a necklace of Irish beads. The day's menu featured Dietary Director Alphonso Wisseh's Palm Africana; Staffing Coordinator Rhonda Gray-Upsey's macaroni and cheese; Social Worker Joan Rhodes' Aunt Rose's kugel; and Kloss' Black Forest cake. The stories and lore behind the food are key factors in the international spread's charm. "It's just fun seeing the different dishes," Vample says. "And it gives you a chance to socialize with people you might know from passing in the hall but never have time to talk to. Everybody talks about the different foods, so you get to learn a lot about other cultures and people's family background." Take her peach cobbler. Vample says the mouth-watering baked fruit reflects her family's southern roots...particularly the way her Georgia grandfather's predilection for a near-daily baking of the delectable dessert prompted the children in the family to hurry home from school each afternoon. Don't ask for the recipe, though. "There's not really any recipe to speak of," Vample says. "I make cobbler the way I make meatloaf. You know, you just put stuff together 'til it looks right...or you go by how you feel as far as adding things like flour and sugar." Welsh contributed a frosted vanilla cake her family's been making "for generations." "It's a simple recipe," she says. "The cake is actually a combination of a couple of mixes, and the icing is plain...but very good. This is the cake my mother always made for all of our birthdays." She told me that this recipe was started by her great-aunt and...passed down through the years. She also shared a story of when she used to make the cake when my brother, sister and I were younger. She would make the cake the night before for an event or to take to work. The next morning when she woke up and went to get the cake, the icing would be cut off of the entire cake. My brother, sister and I loved the icing and would pick at it all during the night until there was none left on the cake. She resorted to putting a 'Do Not Touch' sign on the cake when she baked it." Now, her grandchildren are doing the same (thing). She started to make an extra bowl of frosting just for the kids to enjoy. Whenever there's a birthday in the family, we always want 'Mom's cake.'" "Mom" is Beverly Lowery of Roxborough, the person responsible for Welsh's all-inclusive world view: "When I was little...and asked where we came from...what our background was...my mother always said, 'We're a little bit of everything and everybody, so don't ever judge anybody or feel like you're better than anybody because we're really all the same.'"