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City Critic

Warm Intentions, Meet Cold Reality

By ARIEL KAMINER

What is the sound of one eye rolling? Call Joel Berg, executive director of the [New York City Coalition Against Hunger](#), and tell him you want to engage in that wonderful holiday tradition of volunteering on a soup line in the third week of November.

“[Thanksgiving](#) is to hunger groups what [Halloween](#) is to a costume company,” he said. “Sometimes people actually get mad at us when they call a day or two before Thanksgiving or a day or two before Christmas and want to volunteer, when in fact many of these agencies have waiting lists months in advance.” Out of fear of alienating anyone, Mr. Berg said, some places just make up work for people to do — even if it gets in the way of more important business.

So though Mr. Berg appreciates the thought, he says the best way to contribute is to lend your specialized abilities, such as legal or computer skills.

“The truth is, spending a few hours at a food pantry or soup kitchen helping people apply for food stamps will do a lot more to end hunger than months serving soup or moving cans around,” he said.

But come on: Would [Norman Rockwell](#) have painted a picture of someone using an Excel spreadsheet? It’s Thanksgiving. I wanted to bask in the holiday spirit, in all its manifold hypocrisies.

I started on the coalition’s Web site, www.nyccah.org, which has a [splendid tool](#) to match prospective do-gooders with work that needs doing. I clicked the box that said I wanted to perform basic food tasks. I chose a date, a borough and a couple of nearby subway lines. I came up with: nothing. I added a few more boroughs and a few more lines. Again, nothing.

Finally I selected all boroughs and all subway lines, but the answer was no different. No one from the Bronx to Staten Island needed any help in the kitchen that day.

Still, I couldn’t quite believe any community food program would turn an eager volunteer away. So I went to central Harlem and started knocking on doors. Guess what? Many community food programs would indeed turn an eager volunteer away.

The [Metropolitan Baptist Church](#), on West 128th Street, which serves food Monday to Saturday, starting at noon, did not need any helpers, thanks. [St. Michael's Church](#), on West 99th Street, would have welcomed me at the Saturday meal (10 a.m. to noon), but when I stopped by, the workers were already finishing up, and in any case they had a large flock of volunteers from a local school.

The folks at the [Salvation Army](#) on Lenox Avenue said they were all set, too. I stuck around anyway, and eventually they invited me into the kitchen, where I found two full-time volunteers and a varied cast of walk-ons, including a group from a nearby program for the developmentally disabled. All were directed by a man respectfully referred to as Mr. Geddes, who is so unflappable that he can show up in the morning, plan a menu of protein, vegetable, starch and fruit, and cook enough for up to 200 people before anyone else arrives to assist.

Last year for Thanksgiving, Mr. Geddes roasted 46 turkeys. This year he does not have to. Goldman Sachs is bringing in a catered dinner for a few thousand people.

I stayed for a couple of days, putting sugar in people's coffee (two teaspoons per customer), handing out bananas (one per customer) and wiping down tables and chairs. I had a good time, especially when Mr. Geddes cranked up the calypso gospel and the whole kitchen started shaking it.

But between the efficiency of the chef and the surfeit of other volunteers, there was not more than 30 minutes of work for me to do each day. "Sometimes people come to us and they say, 'We want to end hunger by volunteering,'" said Mr. Berg of the Coalition Against Hunger. "If all you're doing volunteering is taking a slot that someone else would have done anyway, you're not actually reducing hunger."

His advice to those who want to help out: "Please, please, please don't do it just on Thanksgiving, and please, please, please understand, we have skills-based needs that are far more important than just food service." Also in the realm of the triple-please, he wants people to press their elected officials to get involved.

That makes nine pleases. I agreed to help edit proposals for local hunger groups, starting with a grant application for the soup kitchen at the [Greenpoint Reformed Church](#) in Brooklyn.

If checking spelling and grammar is not exactly the standard image of holiday altruism, well, I got a taste of the Rockwell version at the [North Presbyterian Church](#) on West 155th Street, where last weekend I was received with open arms and a full plate. A half-dozen women were bustling about, cooking and serving up a feast they had paid for out of their own pockets — roast turkey, rice and peas, giblet gravy, crusty trays of baked macaroni and cheese, collard greens, salad, individual pumpkin pies, scones and too many other things to mention — for, oh, about a hundred hungry people.

All the Midwestern-ironic nouveau-farmhouse restaurants that cropped up during the last few years would be trying their best to pull off a meal like that on Thanksgiving, but I cannot imagine many would come close. In Red Hook, it would be a destination meal; in Harlem, it's a soup kitchen.

People who can whip up a feast like that (and remain in excellent cheer) do not actually need the help of some newcomer stumbling in off the street, wet from the rain. They let me serve some of the guests, and they accepted my compliments. But they told me that what they really need is money. And that I should eat more.

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