

# Free meal at St. Anthony's draws 1,400

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PENINSULA TIMES TRIBUNE

Elton Howard served his country more than a year ago in the Persian Gulf War, then came home to a life of poverty as an often-homeless civilian.

So he plans to return this week to the Army.

Howard, who served in the gulf war from August 1990 to August 1991 as a fuel truck driver, was among 1,400 people who showed up Thursday at St. Anthony's Padua Dining Room in Menlo Park for a Thanksgiving meal.

Shoveling in a forkful of gravy-soaked turkey, Howard said he was grateful for the charity meal but would rather be dishing it out than eating it.

"I love these people," Howard said. "But this will be the last Thanksgiving I have under these circumstances. Next time, I want to be on the other side of the counter."

Howard said he left the Army because "I thought I was tired of it."

"But after getting out and watching what people were going through, I said no," Howard said. "I missed it."

Howard, a Cincinnati native, said that when he returned to his family and friends, he found his former

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community ravaged by crime and drugs.

"Nobody cares anymore," Howard said. "Everybody is strung out on dope. Everybody is killing each other. I'd rather deal with a structured system. The main reason I want to go back in is to escape."

As it has for nearly two decades, St. Anthony's provided meals for the down-and-out, the financially pinched and those with no one else to share the holiday with.

Sixty-five volunteers helped prepare and serve the holiday banquet, which included 75 turkeys, 320 pounds of mashed potatoes, 280 pounds of vegetables, 240 pounds of dressing, 100 pounds of ham and 40 pounds of gravy, said dining room administrator Sam Acuff.

The crowd was larger than the 1,200 who showed up last year, Acuff said. More than three-quarters of the diners were Hispanic immigrant families, he said.

Standing guard at the rear door to ensure none of the diners got more than their fair

## PENINSULA NEWS



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**Looking to look good** for his Thanksgiving Day dinner at St. Anthony's Padua Dining Room in Menlo Park, Alejandro Vargas combs his hair as he and others wait outside for the doors to open Thursday.

share was Menlo Park firefighter Troy Holt, a former St. Anthony's diner himself.

Holt was 10 when he came with his mother, two brothers and sister for meals after their father left home.

"It's neat because now I'm a firefighter, I'm back on my feet and I get a chance to come down here and help out," said Holt, one of several volunteers from the Menlo Park Fire Protection District.

On the other side of town, on El Camino Real, James Best said he thought about going to

the dining room but decided to first try his luck with his sign: "HOMELESS PERSON NEEDS HELP — HAPPY THANKSGIVING."

Best said he has been periodically homeless for years and is trying to start his own landscaping business. For now, he lives beneath the bridge at San Francisquito Creek, he said.

"There are three days out of the year when I don't like living on the street," Best said. "My birthday, Christmas and Thanksgiving."