

Community Fund staff cooks Christmas meal

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The HOME Youth & Resource Center in Salem, a day program for homeless and at-risk youth, had a Christmas dinner in January — Friday, Jan. 16, to be exact — courtesy of Spirit Mountain Community Fund staff.

"We decided instead of a Christmas party to make dinner for the kids," said Administrative Assistant Kluane Baer. "But the weather was so bad on Christmas, so we're doing it now."

Many of the youth asked the same question, but in a warm living room with the movie "Get Smart" playing on the television and the smell of warm pies coming from the kitchen, nobody was looking this gift horse in the mouth.

The menu included roast pork, baked beans, cole slaw, cornbread and three kinds of pie — apple, cherry and peach.

Community Fund staffers, including Director Shelley Hanson, Program Officer Louis King, Baer and Secretary Jilene Mercier played a table game called "Apples to Apples" with some of the youths as the food cooked, but Mercier was winning everything and the teens eventually opted for the movie.

The Community Fund in 2006 granted the HOME Youth & Resource Center \$35,000 for an evening education program. The grant went through HOME's parent organization, the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency.

HOME's mission is "to provide a

safe, supportive environment where at-risk and homeless youth may have their immediate needs met as well as have positive opportunities to reconnect with their community."

Last year, according to the group, more than 800 youth visited HOME; about 20 percent were recently homeless. More than 7,800 meals were served.

Usual meals have to be "cheap, something kids like, and can be made and put on the table in an hour," said Peggy Kahan, Program Director, "because we hire the kids to prepare and serve the meals as employment training."

A look at the menu indicated something like school lunches, with hamburgers, pizza and chicken nuggets featured.

So, the Christmas meal was a breath of fresh air for the youths. It turned out to be really well-timed, said King, because there's usually so much happening around Christmas and in January the good meals are fewer and farther between.

Some had to leave early and got a piece of pie and milk before they left, but for most it was a sit-down with plates full of food. Program Coordinator Dan Kelley took care of the early birds, and circled with a gallon of milk and refilled glasses as the kids emptied them out.

"The beans are the best," said a girl named Ashlyn.

"It is delicious," said another girl named Ashley.

A boy named Cali nodded in agreement.

But then came the cole slaw re-

views.

"It has a little spice," said a fellow named Kody. "It tasted all right until I was done eating it."

A girl named Kayla sat down, knowing just how far she was going to go with the meal. "I'll have everything but the cole slaw."

"It was great. I loved it," said Taylor of the meal in general.

Mark said, "It was really good."

Destry introduced a new compliment. "It was dank," he said. "I can still taste the goodness in my mouth."

Also for the Community Fund staffers, the day was good.

"I think it's working out brilliantly," said Hanson.

And so it was. The light streamed through the front windows. The movie played on the television. The kids came and went, and greeted each other. Some headed downstairs where other games were played.

Like any big family, lots took place at the edges, but the dinner was the center, and the center held. ■



Below, Spirit Mountain Community Fund staff members, clockwise second from left, Program Officer Louis King, Director Shelley Hanson, Secretary Jilene Mercier and Administrative Assistant Kluane Baer play a game called "Apples to Apples" with a youth during a visit in which the four made dinner for the youth at the HOME Youth & Resource Center in Salem on Friday, Jan. 16. At right, King checks the roast pork to see if it's cooked.

Photos by Ron Karten

