

Point 27...from Page 1A

into production, according to Johnson, who added that the remaining 5% goes to other costs associated with the endeavor and that no salaries are paid to anyone.

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason said he believed Point 27 was a worthwhile organization to support, adding that he is grateful in return for outreach efforts like this one taking his deputies into consideration.

"They brought by enough dog tags for everyone here at the Sheriff's Office to have one," Mason said. "Everything

they've got has scripture on it, which lets people know that God is with you.

"He's with you whether you want him to be or not, but the Christian is the one who's accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their savior, and it should have a special meaning to them.

"And hopefully, those who haven't, the Holy Spirit will come upon them and it will help pique their interest, show them that they are lost and in need of saving and of God's protection."

Both Sheriff Mason and Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer, who also serves part-time as the only major at the Sheriff's Office, were moved to make personal donations to Point 27 last week, and Johnson collected donations from other citizens as well.

Towns County Sheriff's Chief Deputy Terry Conner said the Shields of Strength are much appreciated there also.

"It was very nice and thoughtful of them to honor our deputies and first responders,"

Conner said.

While in town, Johnson and McKellar delivered dog tags for deputies in both counties and for officers in the Blairsville Police Department. They plan on getting back in touch soon to provide enough Shields of Strength for jailers and other local law enforcement agencies.

People who would like to help with this mission can make donations at Point27.org/give.

Thanksgiving...from Page 1A



About 50 delivery drivers coordinated meal deliveries at the Family Life Center of House of Prayer before traveling all over the county to take hundreds of dinners to people needing or wanting one Thanksgiving Day. Photo/Submitted

trimmings for home delivery, pick-up by appointment, or dine-in last week, with all three options allowing for the opportunity to witness to people on Thanksgiving Day.

Nearly a decade in, and the Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner has expanded into a streamlined operation featuring a growing number of volunteers and churches participating.

The effort is a massive logistical undertaking today, though it has humble beginnings, having started with a small group of seven volunteers in 2011 providing 145 meals in hopes of starting a lasting ministry to spread the love of Jesus Christ.

According to organizers, communities everywhere – including some church communities – have been moving steadily away from taking care of their own, which has opened the door for more and more people having to rely on help from the government.

And while organizers know government assistance plays a vital role for families and others in need, they believe reliance on such assistance alone starves people of the spiritual nourishment available in scripture.

This gets to the heart of the Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner, which serves to take care of those who have fallen through the cracks in society by showing them that they are loved by their neighbors and that more resources are available with church involvement.

"The meal is important, but it's mainly to open a door so that we get a chance to minister to people," said Cal Wolcott, who, along with his wife Barb, has been involved in the effort since it began. "We want to move our neighbors closer to Jesus not through preaching, but through service."

2020 is an especially important year for the ministry, as people find themselves more isolated than ever due to public health recommendations regarding COVID-19. Circumstances everywhere have the potential to be more dire, and many folks are living with limited resources.

Patricia Barrett, 67,

opted to pick up her meal accompanied by her son Stacey Dockery and her mother Norma Dockery, all of Union County. This was Barrett's first year receiving a Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner.

Barrett said 2020 has been tough for her family as they continue to live check to check. Still, she remains grateful for everything she has and for community efforts like the Thanksgiving Day ministry.

"This is wonderful," Barrett said. "I am thankful for the Lord saving my soul (when I was 19). He's been so good to me; I've lived through cancer and lost my husband to cancer. I've got a few aches, but I'm still up and going. The Lord has blessed me, and I'm so thankful."

Volunteer Aaron Kasson is thankful, too, for his involvement with the ministry, in which he started on the receiving end. He came upon Wolcott eight years ago during a particularly low point in his life, after his marriage had ended and he was living out of his car.

"Through his ministry and the ministry of others, I'm at a place in my life now where I want to contribute back," said Kasson, now seven years into volunteering and witnessing as part of the Thanksgiving Blessings Dinner.

For others who may find themselves facing dark times and difficult challenges in life, Kasson has words of hope and advice.

"Never be too proud to ask someone for help," he said. "And never be afraid to accept help. That was my biggest problem. Swallowing the pride that I felt and feeling like I had to do everything on my own – that's what held me back."

"(I learned) to open my heart and accept what people were willing to give. That's what saved me. I want to help people so they don't have to go through what I did. I want to try to help them with whatever they're going through, lead them to what's going to guide them the rest of their life."

In addition to their spiritual offerings, the volunteers

prepared a cornucopia of food. For example, Harmony Grove Baptist Church Pastor Scotty Jarrard cooked 92 turkeys in a pair of big smokers, and people from other churches made the sides and desserts.

"We have 13 churches working together this year," Jarrard said. "In a time of adversity, our churches are coming together for the community. What that says to me is there's still hope for unity in our community and in our world."

In addition to the many individuals who chipped in time and donations to make this year's dinner possible, the 13 churches from multiple denominations were:

House of Prayer, Harmony Grove Baptist, Fellowship of the Hills, All Saints Lutheran, Antioch Baptist, Fairview Baptist, Grace Life, First United Methodist, First Baptist, Choestoe Baptist, Vertical, Blairsville Church of God and Mountain Presbyterian.

Moving forward, organizers want to figure out how to reach more local kids with the help of the school system and Union County Family Connection, as to date, they've only been able to provide meals for a fraction of the local children on free or reduced lunches.

They're also looking into working with church groups and volunteers in other communities to establish similar ministries throughout the area, where they would assist with logistics and planning to help get things up and running.

Each year, the Blairsville-based ministry gets requests for meals in both Towns and Fannin counties, for instance, and the organizers are hoping to inspire people living in those communities to pick up the torch of their idea and run with it.

This happened with success in Fannin County this year, with Grace Life Church International volunteers providing 100 meals in their community, and Union County organizers look forward to the establishment of other area ministries in years to come.

Shop with a Cop...from Page 1A

them otherwise, and Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter wouldn't have it any other way.

"The first year we started with 18 kids," Baxter said. "This year, we'll have our biggest number of kids; we anticipate taking 125. This just shows you that we live in a great community that's supportive of not only law enforcement, but of humanity."

"I don't think there's anybody who doesn't want to see any young person not have a great Christmas. We live in a caring community, and it definitely shows in this program."

Baxter said that the Shop with a Cop program highlights what's possible when a community works together to take care of its own, evidenced most recently with the Police Department's annual Rubber Duck Derby fundraiser that raised \$17,000 for the cause in September.

"I can't express my thanks enough," Baxter said of the support. "Especially in a COVID year when people haven't been getting out, our No. 1 fundraiser

with the Rubber Duck race was a huge success. It's the biggest we ever had, and next year is going to be even better."

Of course, the Police Department accepts donations for Shop with a Cop year-round, and Baxter wants people to know that every last cent people give is appreciated, by him, his department, and the children who get to go Christmas shopping.

"Every penny counts," Baxter said. "This money is spent for nothing but these kids, and we make that clear. From the start, we knew that's what we were going to do, that this money would be used only for these kids' Christmas, and that's what we've stuck to."

"If people want to drop a donation by the Police Department, come by and see us Monday through Friday. We're open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m."

Many people and organizations come together each year for the effort, including Union County Family Connection, law enforcement spouses, Blairsville Cruisers, local deputies, Castoff

Pet Rescue, and even Walmart, which provides a community grant and refreshments for the event.

"There's a lot of logistics involved in this, and there's a lot of people, different agencies working together to make this possible," Baxter said. "Our school system has been an important partner for us."

"We couldn't do it without everyone's help, because this is not an 'us' thing – this is a community partnership altogether. We're just the middleman in this; we make it happen, but our community, our citizens, and even visitors drop us off donations."

"We can't express our thanks enough. This is one of the most rewarding events of anything we do in law enforcement – I have to put it right up there at the top."

As it stands, everything is ready to go Dec. 12 for 2020 Shop with a Cop, though Baxter said plans are subject to change pending COVID-19 developments.