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Queens nonprofit takes turkey to Sandy victims

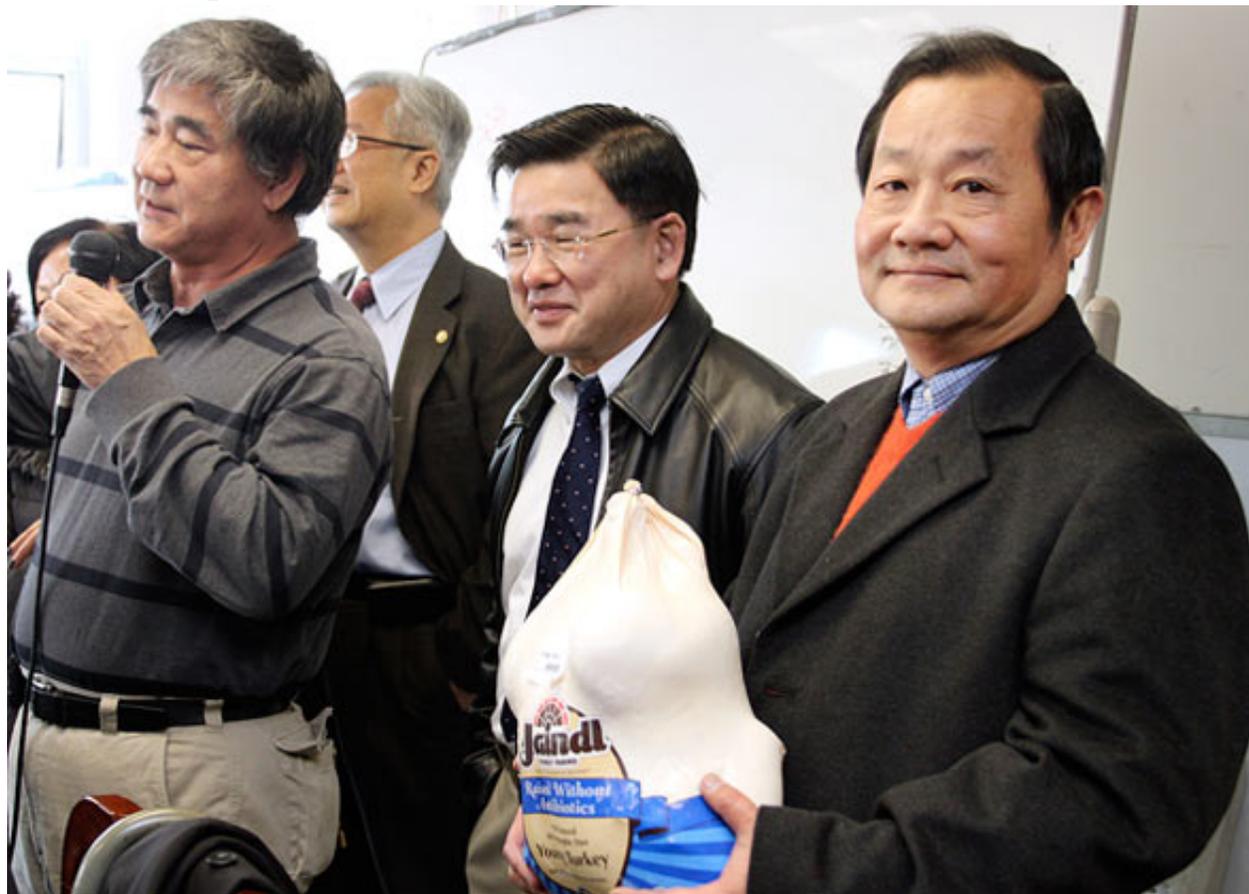


Photo by Joe Anuta

Executive Director of the Flushing Chinese Business Association Peter Tu (r.) gives out a turkey at a Flushing senior center alongside City Councilman Peter Koo (c.). Other groups in the borough cooked Thanksgiving dinner for residents of the Rockaways.

By Joe Anuta

TimesLedger Newspapers

A nutrition-oriented Whitestone nonprofit cooked Thanksgiving dinner for flood victims last Thursday, although disaster experts caution that there is a point where free grub can do more harm than good.

Green Earth Urban Gardens cooked turkey, ham and a host of sides for about 150 people in Far Rockaway, according to Maureen Regan, the executive director. And in the process, the outfit gave a healthy and tasty alternative to some of the other cuisines found circulating in disaster zones.

“People were donating these horrible foods,” she said, referring to residents in the Rockaways subsisting on peanut butter and jelly or bologna sandwiches. “If you’re not feeling well, that is not the food you want to eat.”

Regan’s nonprofit is based around growing vegetables in Queens and distributing them to food pantries and nonprofit kitchens in the area. The outfit farms part of a community plot at Queens Botanical Garden in Flushing, and throughout the spring and summer this year reaped about 150 pounds of veggies per week.

In the spring they planted lettuce, cabbage and broccoli, then tomatoes, beans and eggplants over the summer, with a special focus on vegetables that would appeal to the palates of Queens communities, like Chinese eggplant or spinach indigenous to India. Even though Superstorm Sandy distracted Regan and her team, she eventually wants to grow crops year-round.

The fledging nonprofit is still in its first year of operation, but Regan had made enough connections that she located areas that needed nutritious food and called on contacts to help her get it down to the Rockaways.

Soon she was feeding 300 people each weekend in Far Rockaway near the area of Beach 20th Street.

“That was kind of forgotten, so we concentrated our efforts in those areas,” she said.

Regan hopes to keep bringing hot meals to the area, but according to a disaster specialist, free food could actually end up doing harm to the community.

“When electricity goes back on, you start to kill the local economy — the grocery stores, the restaurants,” said John Berglund, who has been managing disaster relief efforts for The Salvation Army in New York in Sandy’s aftermath. “You don’t want to keep pushing in all these donated products.”

There are still sporadic outages all over the Rockaways, according to the Long Island Power



Green Earth Urban Gardens cooked turkey, ham and a host of sides for about 150 people in Far Rockaway. Photo courtesy Green Earth Urban Gardeners



Photo by Joe Anuta
City Councilman Peter Koo (r.) hoists a turkey to give to a Flushing senior center, while elsewhere in northeast Queens others cooked Thanksgiving dinner for residents of the Rockaways.



Green Earth Urban Gardens cooked turkey, ham and a host of sides for about 150 people in Far Rockaway. Photo courtesy Green Earth Urban Gardeners

Authority, but many still have gas to cook with. Instead of food, the Salvation Army and the city struggled over whether financial assistance would better serve the community, since it could feed people while still helping the local economy recover.

But from Regan's observations, Far Rockaway was still in need.

"I don't think it would have worked down there. You have to look at the demographics," she said. "There are a lot of low-income families. A lot of them live in housing projects and rely on government subsidies."

At least one other nonprofit supports that claim and doled out \$5,000 for Regan to continue her efforts.

Citizens Committee for New York City, a charity that hands out grants to local nonprofits, is offering money for specific hurricane-related projects, and informed Regan that her group was eligible hours after she wrote a request.

"I nearly fell out of my chair," she said.

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