

Since the Beginning, It's Been About the Puffs – and the Volunteers

By Raylene Weigel Boots

It was Ann Venezie who is credited with the idea to sell pepperoni puffs at the Holy Redeemer food booth at the Ellwood City Festival, and the group has been forever grateful! This popular food has been served since the very first Festival, when they operated as the Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church. They served puffs out of the main shelter in 1981, and can be found at that spot to this day.

In order to be ready for the Festival, usually scheduled around the Fourth of July weekend, the group begins their preparations early. They have their first committee meeting in January and look at dates for food preparation. Countless hours are spent going over inventory and ordering new supplies.

At the January meeting, the group also sets up iVolunteer (an online resource to sign-up and manage volunteers), so that workers have an easy and fast way to see the need for help. Getting workers scheduled for all the shifts is very challenging, considering there are three 14-hour days to fill. Some things that make scheduling difficult is that around the Fourth of July holiday, people take vacation, have picnics, or attend class or family reunions on the same weekend of the Festival. Not only that, the first day of the Festival is a Friday, making it even more difficult for those who have work obligations to come and help.

In the past, volunteers consisted mostly of parents whose children attended the parish school working the booth and the kitchen. Now, the parishioners are responsible. One good source of young volunteers includes students who need volunteer hours – members of National Honor Society, Student Council, or Confirmation students are willing workers for the booth. As with most good volunteers, the Festival is not the only event for which they donate their time, and it is difficult for them to volunteer for everything.



Preparations for the parish's annual bazaar in August begins immediately following the Festival, and many workers try to volunteer for both.

Many hours are donated by the workers. Meatball rolling takes three days. Pepperoni/cheese stacking takes four days to prepare. Sauce prep is another three days. A minimum of 60 volunteers for each day is required at the food booth itself on the Festival grounds, while 20 kitchen workers are needed each day of the three-day Festival.

Food is prepared at the parish kitchen and delivered to the booth fresh for serving. Years ago, a minor accident involving the van transporting the food resulted in no serious injuries, but the responding emergency crew wanted everyone checked out at the hospital. When the young men arrived at the hospital covered in sauce, the triage team thought it was blood! Luckily, no one was injured.

The line for puffs is as legendary as the puffs themselves, arguably the longest line of any other food booth on the grounds. The group tries to accommodate those Festival-goers who want to enjoy only meatballs and pasta, no puffs, so they provide a "pasta-only" line that goes more quickly. But co-chair Denise Roth states, "when people see our puff line is short, they hop right in it!" In order to reduce the amount of time people stand in line for a pepperoni puff, the group has developed better

procedures such as the pasta-only line. Innovations like this have increased sales. However, many factors influence the amount of time it takes to get the puff to the customer. For example, the dough raises more slowly on a cool morning, even humidity affects the speed of raising. The number of volunteers can also affect how fast the food can be served.

When it rains, sales tend to dip. However, they still sell a lot of puffs, in fact around 10,000 in all! It takes a massive list of supplies to make that many pepperoni puffs – 1900 pounds of flour, 1500 pounds of pepperoni and 1500 pounds of cheese. They make 175 gallons of sauce. Ground meat for the meatballs comes from a local source, Loccisano's on Pittsburgh Circle, Ellwood City. All paper products are purchased locally at the Ellwood City Candy Company on Lawrence Avenue, and the pop and water they sell is purchased at Giant Eagle in Franklin Plaza, Route 288, Ellwood City.

The legend of the pepperoni puff started at the first Festival in 1981 and has continued as a staple of the Festival food booths. You can enjoy a pepperoni puff this year at the 2018 Festival – or get in that pasta-only line if that is your preference. Just remember that you are participating in a long-held tradition – supporting a local non-profit while enjoying a unique Ellwood City culinary treat.