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LOCAL

A special Interlude for clients, staff

By Nanci G. Hutson
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DANBURY — The night before Stacy Mirkovich was to celebrate a Thanksgiving meal with eight fellow clients and staff of a local mental health agency, she cooked a pumpkin left from Halloween.

In the morning, the 33-year-old Interlude client peeled and mashed it to a puree, added spices and baked the mixture into two loaves of savory pumpkin bread.

A short time before the Tuesday afternoon meal — much of which was prepared in the small kitchen of a condominium that is part of Interlude's 10-client intensive residential program — Mirkovich brought over one of the perfectly brown-topped loaves. Her gift was greeted with enthusiasm, and none was left when the meal was over.

"I enjoy baking," said Mirkovich, who with the help of a counselor found the pumpkin bread recipe on the Internet. "I have so much time on my hands, and I wanted to do this. It was a lot of fun."

Mirkovich saved one loaf to share with her own family today.

"I love these get-togethers. I like to be around people, and I like to be with people on the holidays. It's a very good thing," she said.

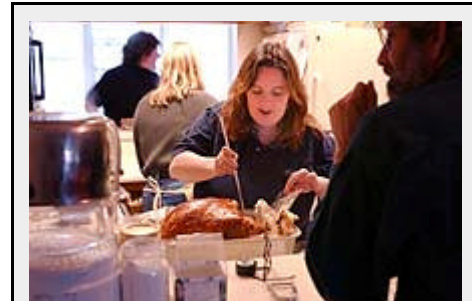
Kerry Ryan, 22, smiled as she peeled potato after potato.

"This reminds me of family; this is a second family to me," Ryan said as she worked alongside fellow clients and counselors preparing for the full-scale Thanksgiving feast on Tuesday afternoon.

As in most families, everybody was given a chore, be it take out the garbage or stir the gravy cooking on the stove.

"It's the cleanup crew we have a hard time finding," joked residential program director Donna Gleissner.

This is the second year Interlude has had this kind of family-style feast thanks to the generosity of Elisa and James Pica, a local couple who bought everything from the turkey to the pies. The Picas could not be reached for comment.



Erin Kiernan
Annie McVerry takes care of the turkey at Interlude, a Danbury agency that works with people suffering from chronic mental illness. The food for the meal was donated by a local couple.



Stacy Mirkovich baked pumpkin bread from scratch for Interlude's Thanksgiving meal.

On the windowsill of the condominium was a thank-you card, and all of the clients and staff made sure to sign a note to them.

Interlude Executive Director Kathleen Deschenes said this is a special time for the clients and staff to spend together. They get to shed their traditional roles and for an afternoon unite by sharing a meal they prepared together.

"I spoke to Donna when everybody was cooking, and she said everybody was having such a good time," Deschenes said.

This year is particularly special, she added, because of all that has happened since the terrorist attacks two months ago.

"I think everybody is a little bit more thankful and appreciative of what they have," Deschenes said. "Just the things we normally take for granted — our families, our homes and the things we have — people are focused more on how fortunate we are. I know I am."

Mirkovich and Ryan agreed.

"I think people will be a little more thankful this year with all that has been happening," Mirkovich said.

"I'm thankful everyone I know is very safe, and I can go to bed and be peaceful," Ryan said.

In particular, Ryan is thankful that for the past year she has been connected to this program, which is helping her better manage her life.

"They guide me, but I still have enough freedom to work and to be an individual and live my own life," Ryan said. "If I need help, they're here for me, but at the same time they respect my privacy."

Another client, Lynne Ciano, said she is thankful to be able to live in the condominiums with her large orange and white tabby, Big Foot. Waiting for dinner, she contemplated whether or not she might share a treat from the meal with the friendly feline.

After a full day of preparing the turkey and all the trimmings, the group dined together, the tables decorated with ceramic turkeys and poinsettia donated by the Picas. Everyone was so stuffed, they opted for an evening dessert hour.

"We had a very nice day," concluded counselor Dena Pollack.

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