



FUTURE OF FILM
SEE PAGE 3

Santa Monica Daily Press

We have you covered

THE CORN BREAD STUFFING ISSUE

Restaurateur serves seniors dinner for Thanksgiving

By David Mark Simpson (dave@smdp.com)
November 26, 2013 in News

MID-CITY — Thirty-three years ago, Fred Deni, owner of Back On Broadway restaurant, found a homeless man in his trash bin.

At the time, he was hosting 80 or 90 friends and family members at his home every Thanksgiving.

“Everyone was just eating and then leaving,” he said. “I said screw it. I’m not going to do it this year and we’re all going to help, so we started a homeless dinner.”

The homeless dinner has since morphed into the senior dinner, which Deni will host tomorrow at his restaurant. It’s the 33rd year he’s hosted Thanksgiving for the community. He expects at least 300 seniors to show up.

About 15 years ago, he made the switch to seniors after he realized he had a very Santa Monica problem on his hands: “I found us competing for homeless.”

The homeless population in Santa Monica kept growing, he said, and a group, Westside Thanksgiving, had started feeding the homeless at the Civic Auditorium.

“It would be like, don’t go there, you have to come to us,” Deni said. “It became about who was going to get the most people and I said, wait a minute. I’m losing sight of what we’re doing here.”

The needy seniors, he said, were always lumped in with the homeless.



(Daniel Archuleta daniela@smdp.com)

AT WORK: Fred Deni poses in the kitchen of Back on the Beach on Tuesday.

“That’s how it started with the seniors and then we coordinated with (City Hall) and the senior services center, which made it very easy, and (City Hall) would assist us, giving us door prizes, providing busing from several locations to Back On Broadway and it really turned into a different thing, but a nice thing.”

Students come and perform classical music and they raffle off presents.

“There are some that are very old, but it’s pretty much the same faces every year,” said Deni, who also owns Back On The Beach. “We lose a couple as time goes on and we gain 10 because the baby boomers are coming up now.”

Some of the volunteers, who started as toddlers, are now in their 20s, he said. The moment that has moved Deni the most over the years is a simple one.

“One time the bus arrived rather early and we weren’t quite ready yet, and they got off the bus and they just sort of all lined up in front of the restaurant and, I don’t know, seeing this line waiting for food was extremely touching to me,” he said.

The thank-you cards get to him every year, too, he said.

“This is a generation that’s different than our younger generation,” he said.

“Thank-you cards choke me up after Thanksgiving.”

The dinner costs \$3 for seniors, said Grace Cheng Braun, president and CEO of Wise & Healthy Aging, which helps with the event.

“It’s done more for making sure that folks are serious in attending, that they (have) a ticket, and we put the monies toward raffle items,” she said.

Deni pays for the event out of his own pocket, she said.

This Thanksgiving, Deni expects two seatings of about 150 people each. They never turn anyone away so he’s planning for about 350 total.

Deni makes a homestyle Thanksgiving meal of turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, yams, stuffing, and pumpkin pie.

The first seating is at 11:30 a.m. and the second is at 1:30 p.m. Deni runs both seatings while making his own Thanksgiving meal, which he brings home for a 30-person dinner.

“It’s a sweet group,” he said of the seniors and the volunteers. “It’s like a little family unit.”