

# A Christmas Family

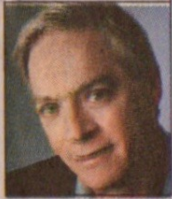


THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODD

Dave Quinn prepares a plate in the busy kitchen at the Narragansett Community Center yesterday. Behind him, Ryan Drugan assembles another. Below, Ted Wright speaks with Charles Hargraves, 77, whose wife died 12 years ago and whose daughter lives out of state.

# *Special dinner welcomes those with no one at home*

**MARK PATINKIN**



Ronald Loss arrived early, and did not want to impose, so he remained in his car outside the Narragansett Community Center. He is 71 and mostly alone in this world. He often spends days on his own, but he wanted yesterday to be different. It is hard, he said, to be by yourself on Christmas morning.

So he drove here, where he knew a meal would soon be offered to those who had nowhere else to go.

He moved his walker off the passenger seat so I could sit next to him. It was 11 a.m. I asked if

he had come directly from his home.

No, he had first gone to Narragansett Town Beach to feed the seagulls.

"I love the beach," Loss said.

Often in winter, he'll walk by the ocean, but the wind was blowing yesterday, and because of his bad knee and hip replacement, he worried it would make him unsteady, so he stayed in the car.

He is retired from Electric Boat. He divorced not long ago, and they did not have children, so it's now just him, alone in a small apartment.

I asked if there were other relatives he could have been with this day.

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# Patinkin

*Continued from Page A1*

"No," said Loss, "I have nobody."

He said it's all right; he is proud of being independent. But again, he said, Christmas should be different.

Then, slowly, he unfolded his walker and headed inside.

It is called The Wright Family Christmas Dinner, and one could say it reflects the original spirit of the day. It is a place for wayfarers to come when there is no room to be found at the inn or anywhere else.

It was begun 15 years ago by one of Narragansett's best-known names. Ted Wright is 78 now. He spent 4 years as Town Council president and 10 as a state representative. In part due to his early career in the rubbish business, he knows this corner of Rhode Island better than anyone and now runs a touring trolley. Some call him the unofficial mayor, others simply, "Mr. Narragansett."

His wife, Barbara, is also a local icon, and now, at 76, oversees the Community Center with no plans of retirement. She jokes that one day they'll bury her in the basement.

The idea was simple enough. Although they enjoyed Christmastime at home, it struck them in 1993 that they knew many folks, particularly seniors, who had nowhere to go on December 25.

"This is the loneliest day of the year if you don't have family to be with," Barbara will tell you.

And so, as they have done for 15 years, they left their home yesterday at 8 a.m. to pull together a midday turkey dinner for up to 100 souls or more. As is now tradition, they were joined by over a dozen family members — daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren.

"They give up sitting around the Christmas tree to do this," Ted said.

His 22-year-old grandson, Ryan Drugan, was there, a URI senior now wearing an apron. He's been doing this since he was a child.

"It's about giving before receiving," he said. "Other people come first."

David Quinn, one of Ted Wright's sons-in-law, was there too, having just worked from 1 a.m. to 7 as a Providence Journal distribution center manager in Portsmouth.

He said people don't realize that yesterday is different from Thanksgiving, when wider families gather. Christmas is often about parents just with their children, and it leaves some folks with nowhere to go.

The Lions Club donated part of the meal's cost, but the Wrights pay for much of it themselves, and do all the cooking, with each family assigned to roast three turkeys at home. The final preparation began early yesterday in the Community Center kitchen, overseen by Richard Drugan, another son-in-law who is a property manager at the Village Inn and was once a short-order cook.

By 12:15, over a dozen folks had come in, with more arriving. I sat at a table with three of them.

FROM PAGE A1

The Providence Journal



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO

**Ted Wright, who started The Wright Family Christmas Dinner some 15 years ago with his wife, Barbara, gets ready to deliver meals to people who could not attend yesterday's dinner at the Narragansett Community Center.**

Marjorie Stevens is 63, retired after 20 years as a janitor at the University of Rhode Island. She was with her cousin Charlie Whipple, 74, who is also a retired URI custodian. He described himself as "an old bachelor." Marjorie said she's divorced with no kids. They live separately in the same building.

"He lives in Apartment 3," said Marjorie. "I live in Apartment 1." I asked what brought them.

"We didn't get invited anywh-

ere this year," Charlie explained

They sat with their friend Karen Hawkins, 59, who also lives alone.

"Normally," said Karen, "I would have been with my brother, but he has Alzheimer's." Two years ago, Karen lost her mom. "It was tough. She loved the holidays."

All three said they needed to be among people today.

I moved to another table and met Charles Hargraves, 77. He

lost his wife 12 years ago. They were married for 45 years. He lives alone at Point Judith and has a daughter who is out of state. He said he did have two invitations for Christmas gatherings, but they were in the evening, and he no longer feels safe driving at night.

Paul Favali, 80, lost his wife 12 years ago, too. It was such a blow he decided to move to Florida to try to find solace in a new place.

"There wasn't anything left for

me here," he said.

He is an Army veteran and filled his time in Fort Myers working with the local VFW, but his son is now in Rhode Island, and a few months ago, he decided to move back up here.

"I'm in my last years," he explained.

He likes to be self-reliant but came here, he said, because being alone on Christmas morning can be "rough."

I had one more chat, this one with Bob Howard, 87, who wore a festive bow tie.

"My wife died second of August last year," he said. They'd been married 60 years. He was a civil engineer, and though he is used to afternoons on his own, this day was different.

"I'd rather be with people than by myself," he said.

At that, one of the Wright sons-in-law approached Howard and asked whether he'd like light meat or dark. A moment later, Howard had a plate with all the fixings.

Ted Wright said the meal would go until 2:30 p.m. and the cleanup until 4. Only then would his family members go home and have their own Christmas.

But he and his wife would stay at the center as long as any guests wanted to linger.

Ronald Loss, whom I first met outside in his car, was still there and said he indeed hoped to stay as long as he could. His walker was by his chair.

He said that if the wind dies down, perhaps later in the day, he would go back down to the water.

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