

# Feast is homemade at Fort Bragg housing complex

Martha Waggoner, Associated Press

Stephanie Kegler planned to cook Thanksgiving dinner just once for the families in the military housing complex at Fort Bragg where she worked. The next year she expected to arrange for a caterer, as military communities typically do for social events.

That was five years ago. She still hasn't called that caterer.

"The word got out that we were going to catering," said Kegler, community manager at Randolph Pointe, home to about 400 troops who are single or living on post without their families. "They started coming to my office. They told me they would help me if we would continue the home-cooked meals. They said it wouldn't be the same."

She served that first meal in 2009 to about 30 people. The event quickly grew. By 2011, when 300 people lived in Randolph Pointe, Kegler worried that she wouldn't be able to feed all the people who might attend or fill the to-go boxes for the folks who can't get off work for the lunch.

"I thought, there's no way I can cook for that many people," she said. By then, however, she didn't have just the residents invested in the meal. Fellow staffers didn't want it catered either and asked how they could help.

"Now, I just don't have a choice," Kegler said. "And I've just learned how to gauge it. We never run out of food. I would have a fit if we did. We fried five turkeys last year. This year, I know I need to fry at least eight in order to make sure we have enough."

On Thursday, she estimates that she'll prepare fried turkeys, ham, macaroni and cheese, collards, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and cornbread for about 100 people, including some friends of the residents and a few civilians who work nearby.

Scarlett Tyner, communications manager for Corvias Military Living, said in an email that the holiday meal is served the Thursday before Thanksgiving "to reach the greatest number of service members while also allowing our staff to enjoy a well-deserved holiday with their families as well. It's a win-win."

Some soldiers travel home for the holiday, "but we've also heard from several past attendees that the luncheon was their only homemade meal during this time of year," Tyner said.

To prepare this feast, Kegler works alone. She won't let anyone help her in the kitchen and only the desserts are bought in stores or prepared by others. Two days before the dinner, she and a co-worker go to three or four grocery stores. By 7 a.m. Wednesday, she is locked in the kitchen alone, mashing and whisking and baking.

"Everyone loves my cooking so I kind of want it done my way," Kegler said. "It's very flavorful if I do it myself."

It's not as if Kegler doesn't have her hands full with her job



Stephanie Kegler, right, prepares a pan of macaroni and cheese as Sinclair Robinson washes dishes ahead of the feast Kegler will serve to residents of Randolph Pointe military housing complex at Fort Bragg. Kegler has been making the annual Thanksgiving feast for Randolph Pointe families and guests since 2009.

and caring for her family, a 15-year-old daughter and her husband, Terry, who retired from the Army this year as a 1st sergeant after 26 years in the military.

In 2010, Terry Kegler developed Guillain-Barré syndrome, a disease that affects the peripheral nervous system. After years of therapy, he walks with a cane and a walker, but the disease damaged the nerves in his hands so severely that he has difficulty with buttons, zippers and shoe laces, Kegler said.

Her family is OK with her dedication to the residents' dinner as long as they get their dinner a week later on Thanksgiving day, she said. "I make sure when Thanksgiving comes, I put forth the same effort I do for my residents," Kegler said. "Then I don't get in trouble."

This year marks the third time that Staff Sgt. Charles McBride will eat a Thanksgiving dinner prepared by Kegler. McBride, who's originally from Manning, S.C., has been in the Army 20 years. He said he looks forward to the meal and the socializing with other Randolph Pointe tenants.

He doesn't worry about what time he gets in line because he knows Kegler knows to expect him.

"She probably already knows to save me a plate," said McBride, who has lived in Randolph Pointe since May 2009 except when he was deployed to Afghanistan. "She knows my face."

The food is served at the community clubhouse. Dessert is served on the pool table, where the ham also is carved. If the weather is nice, Kegler will open the back doors and let people sit by the pool and eat.

The line starts forming about 30 minutes ahead of the 11:30 a.m. meal.

This year, Kegler plans to do something a little different afterward. With her husband and daughter, she is taking a cruise to the Bahamas. But she said the Thanksgiving dinner for the residents won't change as long as she's at Randolph Pointe.

They "look forward to it now," she said. "So we'll keep doing it."

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