

Costumed, dancing kids buoy Greek fest's leaders

ELLIS WIDNER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Tina and Haitham Alley take the slogan of the Greek Food Festival to heart: "Serving food, friends and the community."

The Alleys and the congregation of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church give that motto more than lip service.

In the past decade, the Greek Food Festival, Greekfest Golf Classic and Taste of the Mediterranean have raised more than \$1 million for Arkansas charities and the church.

"That's what we try to do in our church, that's what it's all about," Haitham says. "It's giving back to our community, that's why we do it."

Haitham is the chairman of the Golf Classic, which tees off Monday at the Chenal Country Club; Tina is co-chairman of the Food Festival, which takes place Friday-May 23 at the church, 1100 Napa Valley Drive, Little Rock. Taste of the Mediterranean, the

first event of the three, was held Friday.

Easter Seals Arkansas and the church share net proceeds from the golf tournament and Taste of the Mediterranean, while seven charities and the church share net proceeds from the Food Festival. This year's Food Festival beneficiaries are Arkansas Foodbank Network, Centers for Youth and Families, Community Connections, Easter Seals Arkansas, Harmony Health Clinic, Love Truth Care Inc. and Youth Home.

"We rotate the charities and our members vote on the applications," Tina says. The selection process also brings in smaller groups such as Harmony Health Clinic.

"Not a lot of people know about Harmony," Tina says. "They provide free [health and dental] services for families and people in need."

The benefiting organizations help staff the festival events, numbering some 500-plus volunteers for the food festival alone

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Tina and Haitham Alley agree that their favorite part of the Greek Food Festival is seeing children dressed in traditional Greek and Middle Eastern costumes perform cultural dances. Tina is co-chairing the Food Festival while Haitham is heading up the Greekfest Golf Classic.

Alleys

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and about 30 for the golf tournament.

"They are eager to be there," Tina says of the volunteers. "Stephanie Wilcox, our volunteer coordinator, organizes the shifts and schedules the volunteers; it's amazing."

Haitham says as parents, he and Tina are thrilled to support organizations that help children and children with disabilities.

"That's close to our heart, it resonates with us," he says.

Raouf Kassissieh is the other co-chairman of the food festival.

"I've always been happy to work on this event in whatever capacity," Tina says. "The odds are we know someone who's been helped by one of the charities. That's a big one for me."

The Alleys also view the

events as a teaching opportunity for their three children.

"It's about walking the walk," Tina says. "Our children work at the festival, it's a good lesson for them to be involved."

The economy has presented its challenges for the events, but Haitham, general manager of Diversified Construction Materials, says they've met their budget.

"We've had to work harder, but our community has been very supportive," he says. "We've got nearly all of last year's golf teams back this year."

Speaking of golf, a question had to be asked:

Do either of the Alleys play?

They both laughed loudly.

"We know how to raise money, that's it," Haitham says. "I do drive Father Nicholas [pastor at Annunciation] around the course in a golf cart during the tourna-

ment to meet and greet the players."

The Alleys enthusiastically tout the Greek Food Festival's family-friendly atmosphere.

"Admission is free, parking is free, the trolley is free and the entertainment is free," Haitham says. "Our church neighbors have been very generous in letting our patrons use their parking lots."

"We have a kids area with rides, face painting and lots of things for kids to do," Tina says.

Tina says the women who work in the kitchen are the unsung heroes of the Greek Food Festival, which she says is the largest ethnic festival in Arkansas.

"The women began making baklava and the other pastries in February and pack them into boxes and put them in the freezer," Tina says. "Everything else is made fresh during the festival."

When asked to name their favorite part of the festival,

the Alleys were very much in agreement.

"Of course we love the food, but my favorite part of all this is seeing our parishioners' children dressed in traditional Greek and Middle Eastern costumes doing our cultural dances," Haitham says.

And while tradition holds center court, modern technology has also helped boost the festival. There is a website, greekfoodfest.com and a Facebook page. And she plans to send tweets during the event.

"Tina has been posting recipes on the Facebook site and the response has been great," Haitham says.

Another popular feature of the festival is a drive-through for food. Orders can be placed on the website during the festival.

"Just click on the olive, place your order and drive on over and pick it up," Haitham says. "We'll be ready and waiting for you."



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The Greek Food Festival is a family affair for Tina and Haitham Alley. The Greek Food Festival takes place Friday through May 23. The Greekfest Golf Classic begins Monday.