

FEATURES COLUMN

Life with Children • Carve out volunteer time this holiday

BY ERIC BARTELS

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I wonder if, in some ways, Thanksgiving isn't the least memorable holiday of all for kids.

Oh, sure, there's the big turkey feast, complete with treats like stuffing and yams and pumpkin pie. With a certain kind of luck, somebody might even contribute one of those inexplicable oddities like ambrosia or tomato aspic.

And there's football, if you like that kind of thing, although I can't figure out why no one is able to clear the Thanksgiving schedule of the Detroit Lions. This is a team that plays on fake grass inside a domed stadium – the aesthetic equivalent of framed art prints at Kmart – and has not been a contender since the invention of the seat belt.

Families get together on Thanksgiving, too, but for kids the impact is nothing like Christmas, less than a month away, when those same folks are represented by gifts in pretty packages.

No matter your age, you probably still have vivid memories of the other holidays: Halloween, the Fourth of July, your birthday. Perhaps many. But honestly, do you have a single recollection of a particular Thanksgiving? I didn't think so.

The original concept, as it was explained to us, is noble enough. Early colonists, confident that they were sufficiently well-provisioned to survive the upcoming winter, loosened up a bit and threw a big party. They even invited some local natives, who'd been instrumental in a successful harvest by pointing the newcomers in the direction of crops that actually would grow in the New World.

This bighearted show of inclusion on the part of the colonists would not last, as we know. Squanto and his people and just about everybody else like them got crushed beneath the wheels of the pilgrims' eventual progress.

But let's not dwell on that. Over the years, Thanksgiving would come to represent an opportunity to pause, reflect on our blessings – material and otherwise – and then overindulge in our peculiarly American way. More turkey? Wine? Pie?

"Thanksgiving is a holiday with, like, turkey and dessert," explains my 7-year-old son, when asked for a definition.

Only one Thanksgiving-related memory has ever really stayed with me. One year in college, several friends too far from their families to return home got together for a big dinner. I ate so much I literally could not get off the couch for hours. And I wasn't even in my own house.

Perhaps it's time to consider whether Thanksgiving is missing something. The notion of giving or volunteering around the holidays is not new. There are countless programs run by churches and charitable organizations that provide meals, goods and services to low-income families, the homeless and other underserved communities during the holiday season.

The most convenient way to make a contribution to these efforts is through donation, whether that means writing a check or providing canned goods or clothing.

Jean Kemp-Ware of the Oregon Food Bank (www.oregonfoodbank.org), the hub of more than 900 programs in Oregon and Southwest Washington, says the organization is accepting nonperishable foods at Jiffy Lube locations and participating U.S. Bank branches around Portland.

"That's one way they can help," she says.

But I like the idea of putting boots on the ground. There's nothing wrong with a 400-year-old story about people of different cultures who find common ground and then celebrate it, but perhaps there is a more effective way to bring its lessons home. And perhaps this is the right time.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it seems like we may be in for some uncertain times as a nation. Institutions that we once regarded as part of our foundation suddenly look unstable at best. It may be sensible to begin investing in one another on a more local level.

"What prevents people from volunteering is that they don't know how," says Andy Nelson, executive director of the nonprofit Hands On Greater Portland. "We hear from people all the time that say 'I want to go out and do something.' They're ready to go."

The good news regarding opportunities to volunteer on Thanksgiving itself is that many of them were snapped up by community-minded Portlanders well in advance. As a city, we seem to have that covered. You're off the hook.

Still, the holiday season only begins today. Hands On Greater Portland (www.handsonportland.com), which has been organizing volunteer efforts for more than a decade, suggests several ways entire families can get involved, from sending greeting cards to seniors and children's hospitals to tree planting to meal delivery for folks who rarely leave their homes.

"We said 'Let's try some family projects,' and it has been amazing," Nelson says. "People are thinking 'How can I instill these values in kids?'"

Kids love the idea of helping others. As parents, we should make sure they get the chance. And while I've always seen Thanksgiving as a day for carving turkey rather than carving out time for others, I think I'll find a moment on this day to see what the kids think.

It beats watching the Detroit Lions.

ericbartels@portlandtribune.com