

Grey Bears to host 35th holiday dinner

By ISAIHAH GUZMAN

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

When the California Grey Bears started their annual holiday dinner, some of the seniors they serve now were serving as volunteers themselves. And though the faces running the event are always changing, the tradition has not.

The nonprofit for seniors celebrates its 35th annual holiday dinner Sunday at the Santa Cruz Civic Center. A volunteer corps of 300 will serve free meals to more than 2,400 people at the Civic and deliver hundreds more meals to those who can't make it.

"A lot of them," outreach and marketing director Ed Martinez said of the diners, "this is

the only time each year they see each other."

The annual dinner most illustrates for the public the Grey Bears' motto of "Seniors Helping Seniors," as volunteers in their 60s, 70s and 80s pamper their peers with a hot meal and live entertainment on the Civic stage.

"It's very rewarding," office manager Pat Brown said. "A lot of these people are very appreciative of this. When you call them, they say, 'God bless you.'"

At 76, Brown spends countless hours putting together and coordinating all the delivery-meal routes, though she enjoys the dinner at the Civic.

"My daughter and I stand out in front," she said. "My daughter dresses as a gray bear and we

hand out candy canes to everybody who comes in."

Seniors, however, won't be the only ones helping seniors. Mayor Ryan Coonerty will be on hand, along with other well-known people in the community.

"Some of Santa Cruz's finest citizens put on aprons for one day," Martinez said.

The Grey Bears are trying to keep up with the growing need caused by the lagging economy. The organization hands out 3,200 bags of food per week, an increase of 1,000 bags per week this year.

"We're going to have to figure out a way to ramp that up another 500, then another 500 next year," Martinez said.

But nothing, Martinez said, will change the holiday dinner.

If You Go

WHAT: California Grey Bears 35th annual holiday dinner.

WHERE: Santa Cruz Civic Center, 307 Church St.

WHEN: 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Sunday

DETAILS: Meals are free for seniors 55 and older. Delivery dinners are available to the home bound. Local talents the Dave Ray Band, Jazz Birds, Dave Fields and Penny G. will perform.

INFORMATION: Call 479-1055 for a delivery dinner or information on volunteering and donating.

"It would take an act of God or Congress to stop this," he said.

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PAT BROWN , GREY BEARS