

Unionville BBQ celebrates 70th anniversary

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UNIONVILLE

The Unionville Elementary Barbecue has been an annual tradition for the last 70 years. The recipe for a successful event like this one, which was held again on Friday (Nov. 1), is no secret -- unlike the popular Brunswick stew.

The barbecue is the epitome of all that is good about the South; hospitality, volunteerism, camaraderie and food so good it will make you want to slap your mama*. (*this is a Southern colloquialism. The Enquirer-Journal does not encourage domestic violence.)

Assistant Principal Jessica Conklin said the Unionville barbecue is like a "family reunion." People return to the barbecue and see others they haven't seen in years, or see once a year at the barbecue.

Traditionand Hospitality

Traditional gatherings are a hallmark of Southern culture. Doing something time and time again for the purpose of bringing people together to enjoy each other's company with merriment. Everyone is welcomed at the Unionville barbecue -- whether they've been going for decades, or are new to the area and want to get to know their neighbors.

"It is people who have gone to school here, moved away, take time off from work they come back and help," said Sharyn VonCannon, who is Principal at Unionville Elementary. "They come back because they know they will get to see friends they haven't gotten to see in a very long time."

VonCannon compared the barbecue to the fictional town of Mayberry, which was featured in the television shows The Andy Griffith Show and Mayberry RFD, because everyone knows everyone. "Everybody wants to greet and welcome the new folks in town so the people who are new and have moved in -- people seek them out... and the expression on their face -- I just love to see the new people," she said.

Volunteers

The pilgrimage to the barbecue is as much of a tradition as volunteering for it and there are many ways someone can roll up their sleeves and do the hard work required for an auspicious event.

From being a pit master, to packaging, to serving on the day of the event, 500 to 600 volunteers are needed to make the barbecue run like a well-greased machine.

Craig Rushing and Chad Simpson, both from Unionville, have been helping since they were in the fifth grade serving drinks.

Rushing said the barbecue is a tradition passed down; children start volunteering from a young age, and throughout the years take on more responsibilities. "Now we can't get out of it," Rushing joked.

Some of the pits have been used since the barbecue started in 1949. Since then, more pits have been added. Now, the pits put out 15,000 pounds of pork. The pits are located on the farside of the school campus.

On Wednesday, the pits are cleaned and greased and at midnight the barrels of hickory wood begin burning. The meat is put on at 5 a.m. on Thursday and that takes an hour. Crews come in shifts throughout the day to check on the meat and pits. They begin filling take-out orders at 8 a.m. and start serving lunch around 11 a.m. on the first Friday of every November.

Larry Simpson has been involved with the barbecue for 51 years. He said 70 years ago, there may have only one pit and it did not resemble the pits that are at the school now.

The two long rows of pits produce about 15,000 pounds of barbecue, and the event feeds about 19,000 people.

Smoke lays atop the cinder block pits like a thick blanket. The aroma of the meat is mouth-watering. New coal crackles as its placed in the pits to keep the fires rolling. Outside the pit area, volunteers are chattering and laughing.

The smell of the smoke seeps into your clothes and lingers.

Packing crew

Lane Williams oversees the packaging process of both barbecue plates and gallon containers of barbecue. He has volunteered for the past 29 years.

Williams said by Friday, he and his team of volunteers packaged 6,500 plates, 7,000 bulk barbecue containers and 9,000 bulk Brunswick stew containers. He said 6,500 plates are put together in about eight hours, an average of roughly 800 plates an hour.

At the barbecue, guests can purchase a \$10 ticket and get either three sandwiches, a plate, a carton of barbecue or a carton of Brunswick stew. In 1949, a ticket cost \$1, according to Unionville Elementary's BBQ page.

To keep things organized, those packaging will create a layout of where items need to go so the supplies they need are at their fingertips. This year, they added a third assembly line to make the process more efficient.

"The fun time comes at the end of the day, where supplies start running short and we have to start making decisions," Williams said. Meaning, are they going to serve more bulk containers or plates.

The packaging team always has a plan, but sometimes, that plan has to change slightly depending on what people request.

The packaging team uses the school cafeteria while students eat in their classrooms.

When Williams began, volunteers arrived at the school by 7 a.m., but today, volunteers arrive at 3 a.m. He said, too, the drive thru line used to take hours, but now wait time is around 30 minutes.

"I really look forward to this every single year ...," Williams said. "It's very satisfying when you have a mountain of work in front of us when we on the packers side actually end up catching the people warming up and cooking up for us and it's like we've succeeded in our plan. Whether going home at the end, whether that be 1 p.m. or 3 p.m. it's very tiring, but it's satisfying to know that in at least in a small portion we give back to the community."

Community support

VonCannon said it's an event the school could never pull off without the community support and volunteers.

Continuously finding enough people to volunteer is a challenge. One strategy to get volunteers to sign up is by asking Wingate University athletes and high school honor society students who need to complete community service hours, she explained.

Unionville Elementary has 33 classrooms and each classroom has two parents who volunteer to either prepare or bring store-bought desserts for the barbecue.

Camaraderie

The barbecue was organized to raise money for items the school needed that neither the state or the school district could provide. A community, concerned for the welfare of its young students collaborated to find a way to bring everyone together to benefit the school. There's nothing better than barbecue to bring Southerners, especially North Carolinians, together for a sitting of smoked meat, slaw, stew, a roll, dessert and either sweet tea or "co-cola."

"Essentially, it's the same crowd even after the kids do not come to Unionville anymore...but these folks have been doing it for years and years... and most of the time, the only reason why they do not come is they've aged out," Simpson said.

According to Simpson, the barbecue will last another 70 years because of a "committed community spirit."

Planning a Barbecue

In the seven decades the Unionville barbecue has been held, not one recipe has been changed - neither the sauce (a school recipe), nor the Brunswick stew (the recipe is under lock and key).

Planning for the next barbecue takes six to nine months, VonCannon said. It begins the following week after the barbecue. That week, committee chairs, stakeholders in the community, vendors and others gather to discuss what went well and what needs to be tweaked for next year. Three months pass, and then planning the details start.

"You have to be diligent in your balancing between running a school and academics and planning for a day that's going to happen," VonCannon said.

Because the price of pork and groceries increased this past year, ticket sales for the event were increased by \$1, she said.

She said a common misconception about the barbecue is that it is a PTO (parent teacher organization) fundraiser, but actually, it is a school fundraiser. A portion of profit has gone to updating technology, new library books (including ones in Spanish for the Spanish

immersion program), facility improvements in the gym, and work on the outdoor classroom.

VonCannon explained that school doesn't stop because the barbecue event is happening. Teachers work full days, then stay until midnight helping prepare for Friday. Some, will be back at the school by 3 a.m. or 4:30 a.m packing plates for the take-out line. On the day of the event, students attend school like it's a normal day -- and they eat in their classrooms.

Politics and Pork

In North Carolina, politics and pork go hand in hand and have a long history together. Guests can hardly attend a barbecue the magnitude of Unionville Elementary's without seeing candidates doing some old-fashioned politicking.

To ensure that no guest assumes the school supports a candidate or political party, a sign is erected that prohibits solicitation beyond a certain area.

"Our position is only what's best for kids," VonCannon said. "We have in years past had politicians lined up because there was a large crowd here. It's potentially a place for them to make a lot of contacts...We want to be neutral ground for anybody to feel comfortable to come here and enjoy a nice lunch without being bombarded by politicians."

"It's just good family fellowship and you don't want to make people feel affiliated with one side or the other," she said.

Former Republican candidate for the Ninth Congressional District, Mark Harris, was allowed inside the dining area last year because he volunteered the night before the event.

The Unionville Elementary Barbecue is always held on the first Friday in November. The school is located at 4511 Unionville Rd, Monroe.

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