



# UMB News

## Led by Medical Students, Project Feast Turns 30

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In a tradition that has

*Dozens of 2019 Project Feast volunteers prepare to begin serving on Thanksgiving Day as they gather with School of Medicine organizers Sarah Heaps, Isabelle Lock, Nevin Varghese, and Stephen Semick, left to right, first row; and Rami Yanas, fourth from left, second row.*

brightened Thanksgiving Day for three decades, second-year students at the [University of Maryland School of Medicine \(UMSOM\)](#) organized Project Feast in West Baltimore on Nov. 28 to serve nearly 800 meals.

Like many of the Project Feast events that had come before, the 30th in a row took place in the Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) building that houses Booker T. Washington Middle School and Renaissance Academy, a high school. And like many of its predecessors, Project Feast centered on an ample meal of turkey and trimmings served by smiling volunteers.

(View [a photo gallery](#) on Facebook.)

As usual, the helpers ranged in age from preteens to older adults, some drawn from [University of Maryland, Baltimore \(UMB\)](#) faculty, staff, and students and others drawn by word of mouth or holiday signups from within Baltimore and its suburbs. Volunteers who repeat their service year after year reappeared from the high school and from a Baltimore church.

At the tables, several families dined or encouraged their toddlers to enjoy the crayons and coloring sheets. At one end of the room, musician Kevin Robinson kept to a familiar playlist.

Beyond the cafeteria, with its festive decorations, UMSOM students and faculty members provided health screenings, a University of Maryland School of Social Work staff member offered parenting and other information, and numerous volunteers assisted in a giveaway of clothing, shoes, and pantry items.

Among the guests, that continuity counts.

For widower Darrin Scarbough of Baltimore, the comforting surroundings of Project Feast beckoned as he confronted the first Thanksgiving since he had lost his wife, Maria. "We were inseparable," he said, expressing grief over her death from cancer last winter. The one setting where he thought he might pull himself together was Project Feast, which they had attended together during holidays past.

He was right, thanks to the tasty meal and the friendly volunteers on the serving line and at the dessert table, Scarbough said.

Other diners who return to Project Feast on Thanksgiving Day come for both the food and the camaraderie. Demetrius Frazier of Baltimore had one word to describe his turkey dinner: "magnificent." He said he went to junior high school in the building and lives nearby.

On this occasion, guests and volunteers alike were in for a surprise. A 30th anniversary ceremony marked the occasion.

UMSOM Dean **E. Albert Reece, MD, PhD, MBA**, UMB executive vice president for medical affairs and the John Z. and Akiko K. Bowers Distinguished Professor, expressed gratitude to volunteers and commended the team of medical students, who are members of the UMSOM Class of 2022.

"Project Feast exemplifies the commitment to the community by the University of Maryland School of Medicine," Reece said. "By giving, we are receiving."

Next, the student organizers honored Project Feast leaders. They gave flowers to faculty adviser **Sheri Slezak, MD**, professor, division head of plastic surgery, and vice chair for faculty affairs. They presented a framed certificate to chef Sheila Travers and co-chef Clinton Tate.

Travers, a BCPS employee, has presided in the Project Feast kitchen for 20 years; Tate has handled logistics and more for 19 years. The pair work closely with the student organizers to stage the complex event. By one estimate, Project Feast has served more than 7,400 pounds of turkey to thousands of people over its three decades.

The 2019 organizers were **Sarah Heaps, Rami Yanes, Isabelle Lock, Stephen Semick, and Nevin Varghese**.

Slezak was accompanied at Project Feast by her daughter, Katie Duncan, MD, an ophthalmologist who was among the student organizers nearly 10 years ago when she was in medical school. On this day, she was assisting the UM Student Sight Savers Project, along with Mona Kaleem, MD.

At a workstation in the hallway, students offered glaucoma screening and visual acuity testing. Nearby, other medical students performed blood pressure screenings.

Participating UMSOM faculty members included **Vincent Conroy, DScPT**, assistant professor of physical therapy and rehabilitation science. He said he was pleased to be volunteering at his first Project Feast. "After 30 years, I'm glad I had the opportunity to come," Conroy said.

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