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WKU instructor hosts international students for Thanksgiving dinner

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com

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Julie Lee

Submitted/

Western Kentucky University faculty member Julie Lee was busy making pie crusts Tuesday ahead of a Thanksgiving Day dinner that she and a few helpers planned to put on for WKU's international students.

"We had to run around last week and make sure we had enough turkey," said Lee, who also chairs WKU's Faculty Senate.

"I didn't have 80 people coming the first year!" Lee said, referring to when it was just her peeling potatoes and tearing up loaves of bread for stuffing.

After a pause last year due to the pandemic, Lee was eager to return to form for the turkey day dinner, now in its fifth year at the university.

As an instructor of nutrition and dietetics, Lee also has more than a decade of experience as a chef and pastry chef working in the hospitality industry to draw upon.

Still – between baking 30 pies and six 20-pound turkeys, along with all the usual Thanksgiving dishes – Lee had her work cut out for her. She was expecting at least 40 students and planning for the possibility that each one could bring a friend.

The flood of international students coming to study at WKU has waned in recent years. Fall 2021 enrollment figures show only about 200 currently attend the university, with the top five countries being Oman, Saudi Arabia, India, Canada and Kuwait.

“Stuffing is something that makes a lot of them scratch their heads,” Lee said. “And cranberry relish, very strange!”

Her goal was to have enough food so that the students could also have a takeaway plate for later. Campus dining venues are closed on Thanksgiving and buses don’t run, Lee said, leaving international students without on-campus food options.

Made possible by support from WKU’s International Student and Scholar Services, Lee said none of the dishes use bacon and half are vegetarian, making it acceptable for most diets.

As for the turkeys, which can prove tricky to properly roast because of how they’re composed, Lee opted to braise her birds instead. Preparing them more like a pot roast ensures they stay tender and moist until supper time, Lee said.

Asked why she goes through all the trouble, Lee said cooking a Thanksgiving meal for the university’s international students lets her introduce them to something “uniquely American.”

“It is uniquely American, and it would be a pity for them to study here and not celebrate one of our greatest holidays,” Lee said.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.