

Thanksgiving Comes Full-Circle

A commentary
By Jacqueline White



My daughter has come full circle. This Thanksgiving, she is cooking a turkey dinner for 20 clients at her job, a supportive housing program for people with mental health issues.

Fifteen years ago, when I first met Amy, whom I would later legally adopt, she was 19, homeless and living in a youth shelter. My former partner and I were matched with Amy through the Twin Cities GLBT Host Home program. (Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth are disproportionately represented among the homeless.)

The first Thanksgiving we spent together, the stakes felt high. I wanted to offer some vision of home, which involved tasks I wasn't entirely proficient at, like cooking a large animal carcass in an oven. But, working together, we were able to put on the table a reasonable facsimile of the traditional fare, complete with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce.

We invited another adult host and two young people whom Amy had met at a drop-in center for homeless youth — Josh and Richard. After my slightly anxious daylong effort monitoring the turkey's progress, I can still recall the relief of sinking into a chair, the quiet murmur of grace, the clinking of serving spoons against steaming bowls, and then the quiet.

No one said anything. They were chewing. Was the food OK?

That's when Josh looked up from his plate and declared: "This is the best Thanksgiving I've ever had."

I saw then that what we had was enough. In fact, it was more than enough. We had a group of polite people sharing food that had been prepared with care. And then I thought about what we didn't have: angry words or drunken relatives or violence of any kind.

Amy and I have since shared many other Thanksgivings, sometimes eating with her adoptive father, sometimes traveling to Milwaukee to join my parents and sister. On those occasions, my late father, who was the family chef, recruited Amy to be his culinary assistant. More recently, we've eaten turkey in the dining room of the senior living community where my mother — whom Amy calls "Grams" — now lives.

The Thanksgiving turkey, I've realized, is more than just a turkey. It's a measure of family connection: in Amy's case, a stand-in for the ongoing support that all young adults need as they launch themselves toward independence, but that young people who are homeless or aging out of foster care too often don't receive.

Some of that assistance is starkly financial: Almost 60 percent of American parents subsidize their adult children, even into their 30s. Other support is seemingly ephemeral, such as praise for a meal well cooked or a feeling of togetherness at holidays. None should be taken for granted.

In Amy's case, the support she received means she, who was once homeless, is now in a position to offer sustenance to people who are currently in need.

And that makes for a true Thanksgiving.

Jacqueline White is the founder and director of the [Minnesota Host Home Network](http://MinnesotaHostHomeNetwork.org). This commentary about her experience as a host home host ran on Thanksgiving 2013 in newspapers across the country. She can be reached at jw@jacquelinewhite.net.