Loyola feeds the thankful

Students far from home gather to share Thanksgiving dinner

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Loyola University graduate student Crystal Norwood didn't go home to New York City for Thanksgiving because of the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy.

"My family's still not home because of Sandy," said the 22-year-old Norwood, whose house in Queens was left uninhabitable by the superstorm.

Her Loyola classmates, Jia Yao and Wenjun Chen, stayed on the school's North Side campus for a different reason: Their homes are 7,000 miles away in China.

Still, the students were among more than 100 people who sat down together Thursday at Loyola to share a traditional, family-style Thanksgiving dinner.

"I think it's a good chance for people to get together and talk to each other and get into American life," said Chen, a 22-year-old graduate student spending her first Thanksgiving in the United States.

That's the idea behind the free holiday dinner that was offered for the first time by Loyola's campus ministry and Aramark Food Service, which runs the school's dining program.

Realizing that some students live too far away to head home for the four-day break, school and food service officials decided to provide an alternate holiday meal to bring them together on campus.

"It's just an opportunity to express a sense of community," said Rev. Patrick Dorsey, a Loyola faculty member who helped draft the holiday meal plan.

The meal also gives hungry students a chance to enjoy a traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

"Students being students, they're just grateful to have the food," said Dorsey, who on Thursday helped oversee the distribution of holiday staples including roast turkey, ham, stuffing and pumpkin pie.

The sentiment, and the food served up at the Centennial Forum Student Center, were appreciated in almost equal measure.

"It's very nice, especially when you're away from home, so you don't have to do the fast-food thing or try to buy just enough for two," said D.J. Watson, a grad student from Arkansas who dined with his wife, Pamela Johnson, another Loyola grad student.

The couple also joined Norwood, Yao, Chen and others to dine and chat — a gathering that made the meal more special.

"It made me feel like being in a family," said Yao, who was familiar with the American holiday before she arrived in the U.S. last August.

The Thanksgiving celebration — gathering together with family members for a festive meal — reminds her of the Mid-Autumn Festival, a somewhat similar holiday in China.

One difference, though, is the roast turkey, Yao said.

"It's delicious. They don't have such a big bird in China," she said.

She and Chen also have heard of another American holiday tradition they may try: shopping on Black Friday.

"It sounds pretty cool," Yao said.

ABOVE: Crystal Norwood, a graduate student originally from New York City, dishes out food during a Thanksgiving dinner at Loyola University Chicago's Centennial Forum Student Center on Thursday.

LEFT: Wenjun Chen (left) and Jia Yao, both accounting graduate students originally from China, enjoy their Thanksgiving dinner at Loyola.

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