

BOSTON AREA NEWS

Is the Greek Festival Tent Still Holding On?

By Theodora Tsevas

Every year, Greek Orthodox churches across the country pull up white tents over cracked asphalt. Tables unfold. Trays appear. The gyro station clicks on. There's music, and the heat from grills, and the sound of someone asking where the loukoumades line starts.

At Taxiarchae Archangels Greek Orthodox Church in Watertown, Massachusetts, the festival arrives, like it always has, with urgency, with pride, and people come each year. But beneath the rhythm of prep shifts and pastry stations, a question lingers: Is the festival changing? Or slipping?

"We've all been brought up in this parish," says Frances Levas, a lifelong parishioner and one of the festival's lead organizers. "We've seen our parents do this, and now our granddaughters—they're cutting basketball camp to come here."

The tent isn't new. The generation under it is. Some come to help. Some come to watch. Many are no longer available. "I notice that each year, it increases," Levas says of attendance. "Even though sometimes the volunteers decrease." Her voice carries without force, the tone of someone who has done this too many times to pretend it's easy. "We still have our bumps. Of course, we pray for no rain. But we're very fortunate. This parish really gets it."

Not everyone can show up. But enough still do.

Vicky Karalis has worked almost every angle of the operation. She watches for who comes back and who quietly drifts. "We have the older and younger generations helping," she says. "The younger ones are even doing easier stuff like filling up the coolers. It makes it fun



because they bring their friends."

Karalis doesn't romanticize the work. She tracks the costs. "I believe it is more successful," she says. "We try to be on top of our costs. We rein in our costs. We've got it down more to what we need, so we're not overspending."

She gives credit both ways. "The older generation didn't have the means to do that. They were old-school, right? From Greece. We're better at management now. But their work ethic was better. They worked in restaurants. It came naturally to them. For this generation, it's not second nature, but they're willing to learn."

What success looks like now includes flexibility. Some menu items had to go, not because they failed, but because there were no hands left to roll a thousand dolmadakia. Every year, many older women from the parish cook the food for the festival. This preparation



takes a whole week. "You don't want to overdo it with them," Levas says. "These ladies have done so much for the church." So much of the festival still runs the way it did decades ago, off unpaid labor, off memory, off presence.

Each year, Greeks and non-Greeks alike come to the festival for a plate of food, some dancing, and a sense of community. The menu features traditional dishes like moussaka, pastitsio, gyro, and more, though not everyone arrives knowing what to order. "When people can't make a decision," Levas says, "I'll say, 'Do you like pasta?' This is the Greek version of lasagna.' And they try it. And then they try everything." For her, that moment is what makes the work worth it. "It's about sharing the culture with people who don't know it," she says.

The festival's fundraising arm now includes an ad book, launched in 2019.

“We go to local businesses,” Levas says. “2019 wasn’t bad. Then 2020 hit. We didn’t have fundraising, but we didn’t have expenses. 2023 was the best year. People were away from each other for so long. They needed the connection.” But the book has its own headaches. “People call after the deadline,” she says. “And that’s a problem. Because we cannot just snap our fingers and pray that it comes out right.”

A lot of what’s changed has nothing to do with the festival itself. Life is different now. Sports take over weekends. Workdays spill into Sunday mornings. “I was brought up where church came first,” says Karalis. “Now the parents have to choose. If their kid might get a scholarship from football, what are they supposed to do? It’s hard.”

Karalis has seen it firsthand; her own son learned every piece of the background work. “Now his daughters are 7 and 10. And the morning of the

festival, they told him, ‘Pick us up at 12:30 from camp. We have to go help at the festival.’”

The Watertown church sits among a cluster of other Greek Orthodox parishes, most hosting their own festivals all summer, within the same 10-mile radius. But there’s no sense of rivalry. “There are a lot of Greek churches around here,” Levas says. “We’re the last ones in June. Considering that, we do very well. These are all the festivals until September. All New England.” Karalis adds, “We support the churches in the area. Most of our parishioners do. There’s still a sense of community.” Even the neighborhood waits for the event. “Our neighbors are Armenians,” Levas says. “They cannot wait for festival day.”

One of the volunteers this year is Dina Zahos, who just graduated from high school. She’s Filipino, Indian, and Greek, and she’s running the loukou-

mades station for all three days of the festival. “This is my church,” she says. “I will always be here to help.” Zahos also volunteers at Filipino and Indian festivals, which she sees as a way to connect with and learn from different cultures.

She’s witnessed the fatigue that builds each year. “People might complain. They’re on their feet for hours,” she says. “But most of them come back next year.” Some people commit. Others simply can’t. Priorities have shifted.

The rhythm of the festival has shifted, too, slower in some places, thinner in others, but it hasn’t stopped. The volunteers who return each year carry more than just trays of food. They carry the expectation that the tent will go up, the food will be served, and the community will gather once again, whether or not the roster looks the same.

And at least for now, the Greek festival tent is still holding.

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