

BY SUSAN JACOBSON
Staff Writer

APOPKA — Jackie Wallace moved to Central Florida in July to escape from the bad economy in upstate New York and find work as a chef.

After four months of pounding the pavement, however, the father of two is still unemployed.

On Thursday, he celebrated Thanksgiving with nearly 300 other people who couldn't afford their own holiday dinner or had nowhere else to go. This was the 29th year for the free, homemade meal at First Baptist Church of Apopka.

"You can see the love that they put into it," said Wallace, 47, as

scooped up a portion of turkey, stuffing and mashed potatoes.

Allyn Griffin, 65, is one of five people who started the tradition as a ministry to the homeless of Apopka. It has grown to include families and singles from across Central Florida.

"You can't come here and not get caught up in the excitement of helping and serving," Griffin said as she glanced around the church's fellowship hall, where guests were served at long tables on place mats decorated with a fall farm scene.

José Martinez, 54, and his family spent their fourth Thanksgiving at the church. A golf-course maintenance worker, Martinez has to find ways to stretch his

wife, four children and two grandchildren.

"It's a helping hand for hard times," said Martinez of Apopka. "And they treat you like kings."

Although organizers hope to save souls while they feed families, there are no strings, church administrator Lyle Forsberg said.

"We want it to be a time where Christians outreach to those in need," he said.

For people too sick or frail to attend, volunteers delivered turkey and all the fixings, including home-baked cake and pie. Volunteers from the community and other churches cooked, served and cleaned up, too.

Regina Cole, 44, was among

4 p.m. Wednesday cooking and setting up. She arrived at the church at 7:30 a.m. Thursday with two adult sons to serve the meal.

"It's become our family tradition," Cole said. "It's the one time that people who don't have much can come here and be waited on."

Joshua Kern, 16, agreed as he sliced pie and flipped it onto plates for the guests while his sister Ruth, 15, did the same with cake.

"For me, it's just the satisfaction of knowing I'm able to help people out — and also get a free slice of delicious-tasting pumpkin pie," Joshua said.

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Lancaster students returning to new school

BY LAUREN ROTH
Staff Writer

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Students at Lancaster Elementary, who have gone a year without a playground and eat meals in a cramped, dark, dingy cafeteria, have something special to give thanks for this Thanksgiving. When they return Monday, it will be to a new, \$18.6 million building with the latest technology.

Their cafeteria will nearly double in size, and all 40 portable classrooms the school was using will be emptied of students. Instead, the 836 students will learn in colorful, naturally lit classrooms with new carpet and tile.

Chief Facilities Officer John Morris said the school, which was



LAUREN ROTH/STAFF

Lancaster's new "tot lot."

slated for a December completion, was ready early. It also came in below its \$191 million budget. The school replacement in south Orange County was funded by the half-penny sales tax. It is number 69 on the 130-school list.

The new school replaces a

building that opened in 1961.

The school shares a kitchen, central energy plant and storm-water system with adjacent Walker Middle School, producing \$500,000 in savings.

Principal Bibiana Gavillan said she can't wait to see her students' faces Monday. Nearly 95 percent of the students come from low-income homes in the surrounding neighborhood. Gavillan said that students will feel less cramped, and she should be able to feed lunch to all of her students between 11 a.m. and 12:45 p.m. Currently, students eat from 10:30 to 1:15 because it takes so long to get through the single line.

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