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Chinese restaurants to help Tibetan children through 'Touching Hearts'

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by Holly Usher Staff Writer
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This Chinese New Year, it will be possible to save the world one lo mein dinner at a time.

Well, maybe not the whole world, but eating at Asian restaurants throughout Pittsburgh will help save the lives of dozens of Tibetan children with congenital heart disease.

The South East Asia Prayer Center, headquartered in Oakmont, has teamed with the Pittsburgh Chinese Restaurant Association to round up money for the prayer center's Touching Hearts program.

Touching Hearts, which launched in 1999, screened more than 12,000 children for congenital heart disease -- a disease that causes abnormal blood flow and can lead to death.

Tibetan children are susceptible to congenital heart disease because the region's high elevation can cause oxygen deprivation in newborns.

The prayer center works with Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh to provide screening and treatment

for every child in need.

This summer, the prayer center will train local Tibetan doctors and dedicate a 16-bed pediatric intensive care unit and a catheterization lab for treating patients.

But equipment and treatment aren't cheap.

Luckily, more than 300 local Asian restaurants agreed to donate 10 percent of an entire bill to the Touching Hearts program.

"People have been really receptive to it so far," says Matt Geppert, director of the U.S. chapter of the prayer center.

"They get to see that there is this growing Chinese community in Pittsburgh."

The prayer center and Mike Chen, president of the Pittsburgh Chinese Restaurant Association, began developing the project last year.

Prayer center members devised a plan over lunch at Chen's restaurant, China Palace in Wexford, with six doctors visiting from Tibet.

Chen was so moved by the charity, Geppert says, he felt compelled to do something to help.

Geppert attributes it to serendipity.



"Three hundred restaurants are really significant," Geppert says. They have a lot of projects that is local but that's involved throughout China.

Although money from the program will be donated internationally, Geppert says one of the major pluses is bringing Pittsburgh residents into the Chinese community.

Help:

More Communities:

Chinese New Year is, by population, one of the largest celebrations on the planet. The

celebration begins on the first new moon of the new year -- this Sunday, and culminates in a Lantern Festival 14 days later.

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"It means everything to them. It's their big, big holiday. So if they have people here in Pittsburgh come in and say happy new year, it would mean the world to them."

English-speakers can wish friends "congratulations and be prosperous" in the new year with a simple "Gung hei fat choi" in Cantonese.

It would make them feel welcome in the community and just build that bridge. That's what we're all about."

To Contribute

Local restaurants are participating in the Touching Hearts program Feb. 18 through March 4.

Oakmont: Imperial Garden along Allegheny Avenue.

Verona: Dragon along Allegheny River Boulevard.

You can download the invitation (required for the donation) from <http://seapc.us/>.

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