Meals on Wheels of Charlottesville | Albemarle

Neighbors helping neighbors … one meal at a time.

by Leslie Middleton
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A Family Affair: Volunteering at Meals on Wheels

"It's an easy place to volunteer. A very well run program. And," says Mary Wilson, "it's easy to volunteer with kids."

She should know. Mary and her three children have been Meals on Wheels volunteers since her oldest child was five. Meals on Wheels is the non-profit program that delivers meals to homebound clients five days a week throughout the year.

Sometimes volunteers drive their routes with their spouses or friends. But with children?

Mary explains that giving has always been a part of her family's home life.

"From the time they were babies, my husband and I wanted to make sure that our children knew about helping. That they understood about people who were different from them. And that they accepted people with handicaps." It started with the former adult day care program called "Options." Every Friday, the Wilson family hosted several severely handicapped individuals for the day. Brought them right in to their home. Ate with them. Played with them.

Mary says her daughter and two sons were really young then. "We couldn't talk very well and neither could our guests. They drooled, and so did we." Her use of the inclusive "we" is indicative of the larger lesson she was teaching her children. Her daughter Emily, now seventeen, puts it this way: "There was no issue. It was a 'we're all just people' attitude that we grew up with."

When everyone in the young family could walk, they started delivering the neighborhood newsletter. It was a family-affair, and these lessons of life were just part of the home schooling lessons the Wilson's prepared for their children.

Then came Meals on Wheels, the program that brings a hot meal daily to area residents who are unable to cook their own meals. Some live alone and are recovering from surgery; some have other mobility problems. "My kids were so small that they had difficulty carrying the insulated meal bags out to the car." Daniel, Luke, and Emily became a fixture on the route that Mary drove week after week.

"The clients loved seeing them, and the kids got very attached, too." Mary tells of delivering the daily meals to Catherine Bruce, who has become like family to all of the Wilson's. She tells of the time one of her sons returned to the delivery route after a long hiatus. Catherine took her cane and pulled the lad to her like a lost sheep, saying, "Where you been, boy?" It's clear in the telling: the affection goes both ways.

Mary's eldest, Emily, went straight from home schooling to PVCC, fitting in an amazing array of work and volunteer activities in her 17 short years. She's been in Honduras for three months this summer: first language school, then volunteering her time in an orphanage.

"I loved doing Meals on Wheels as a child. My parents made it seem normal, like eating, sleeping, and grocery

shopping."

She adds something unexpected: "I had such a gentle introduction to the concept of death." She's referring to how sometimes the older ones would decline and finally die. "But the focus was always the relationship."

Emily has gone on to volunteer in UVa Hospital's summer intern program and liked it so much that she's been a year-round volunteer for the last three years.

Emily thinks that the value of volunteering her time from such an early age is that she has little judgment of people and their differences. "When I was in Honduras, my best friends included a 3 year old child and a 55 year old nun from Ethiopia. When I look at others my age, I see that they don't tend to have friends outside of their own age group."

Late in August, Emily will be on a panel of teenagers at a home schooling conference in Richmond. She plans to talk about volunteering and how it is such a fabulous way to learn a culture. A different culture, like in a foreign country. Or simply the culture of going in to other people's homes -- those who are less fortunate or disabled.

Meeting others where they live: this is what being a volunteer for Meals on Wheels is all about. And the Wilson family shows how this can be truly a family affair.

Contact: 2270 Ivy Road, (434) 293-4364, or Email: mandy@cvillemeals.org