Meals on Wheels of Charlottesville | Albemarle

Neighbors helping neighbors … one meal at a time.

by Leslie Middleton
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Seniors with Wheels Deliver Meals

Ann Shaffer pulls carefully onto Carleton Road from Blenheim Avenue as we head towards another stop on her Meals on Wheels delivery route. "There are a lot of nice cats on this street,"she tells me, after having ascertained that, like her, I am a cat fancier.

Ann has been delivering meals to homebound citizens in this particular neighborhood for over five years , so she's sure to see things that others might not. In fact, she actually IS a part of this neighborhood making her rounds just like the postal delivery person, the City Public Works employee, the telephone lineman. Her service, like theirs, keeps people connected to the greater community during times in their lives when it's difficult to maintain those ties, when they're unable to shop and cook for themselves.

I'm riding with Ann to see "a day in the life" of a typical Meals on Wheels volunteer. I meet her at the Kluge Children's Rehab Center's (KCRC) cafeteria kitchen at 10:45 to help her check the hot entrees and cold additions specially prepared and packed for each of the seven people she'll visit. Other volunteers and staff have carefully laid out these meals, marked with labels that say, "no salt", "no sugar", and other individual dietary needs of the clients. Large insulated bags full of packaged meals hoisted over our shoulders, we're out of the door to her car by 11:00 a.m. Ann lays the printed route on the dashboard for me to see, but she knows it by heart.

Ann's routine today may be typical, but in some ways she's no typical volunteer. Ann has been with Meals on Wheels since its inception in 1977. When she moved here from Morgantown, West Virginia, she was eager to help in a program like the one that had so benefited her mother in the last years of her mother's life. That makes her a veteran volunteer by anyone's standards: 25 years of service and still going strong.

Church Women United got Meals on Wheels rolling in 1977, and since then the program has been providing hot, nutritious meals to residents of Charlottesville and nearby locales Monday through Friday every week of the year. Funded entirely by area donations and local fundraising events such as the 3rd Annual Kitchen Tour (coming up Sept. 12 and 13), the program is lightly staffed, relying heavily on volunteers to pack the meals and to drive the delivery routes.

Another long-time volunteer, Arthur Stocker, just retired at the end of May from 25 plus years' service to Meals on Wheels. I caught up with him at his home on Pantops Mountain. His apartment includes mementoes of a long distinguished career in education as a professor of Classics at UVa. Also a plaque designating him as qualified to claim an age of 90 or beyond, a gentle way of not telling the exact details.

How did he get started with Meals on Wheels? "Well, my wife, actually started with it and from time to time, I helped her out by riding along. I was impressed immediately because it is a real service," Arthur tells me. When his wife died seven years ago, he kept up

delivering the route, sometimes with a partner. He's been on Meals' Board of Directors and has seen it grow and change from its beginning days operating out of the old Blue Ridge Hospital, then Martha Jefferson Hospital, and now KCRC.

In the 1990s, Meals on Wheels has averaged 22,000 meals per year. Since 2000 the numbers have increased dramatically to 33,000 a year and seem to be on the rise. While volunteers are asked only to make sure the meal gets to the client, they can't help be the eyes and ears at clients' homes, occasionally noticing if someone needs more help.

Though visits are brief, occasionally volunteers may be the only person the client sees that day. An offering of food, a smile, and "How are you today?" can go a long way to a homebound person. Ann Shaffer hosts a WTJU program on classical and opera and volunteers at UVa. Hospital's Gift Shop, but busy as she is, she keeps on driving and delivering because, "It's just such a direct way to help people."

Now that he's no longer delivering, Mr. Stocker admits that he's a little bit at loose ends on Monday mornings, being so accustomed to the pleasant routine of delivery Route 7. "I only stopped doing it, actually, because my partner decided he couldn't drive anymore. I figured it would be a good time to stop as well." I have no difficulty imagining that he's found plenty to keep him busy, though. It's the contact with the cafeteria staff, the Meals on Wheels volunteers, and the clients that is the two-way gift of this service. Arthur has built quite a friendship with his delivery partner, Dabney Kern. "We still get together for lunch ourselves about once a month." This seems a perfect way to continue the tradition and mission of Meals on Wheels — "Neighbors helping neighbors — one meal at a time."

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