

good neighbors

Aspinwall Meals on Wheels Turns 40

BY SANDRA LEVIS



back in 1975, a small group of volunteers got together in the basement of Aspinwall Presbyterian Church to provide food for 20 individuals living in the Fox Chapel Area School District who were either homebound, unable to cook, or unable to shop for themselves. So began Aspinwall Meals on Wheels.

Forty years later, the mission is still the same, even if a few things have changed. After a fire destroyed the neighborhood church in 1999, the volunteers relocated to St. Edward Church in Blawnox, where they continue to operate today. Two meals—one hot and one cold—are prepared and delivered Monday through Friday, including holidays, to nearly 60 people living in Blawnox, Aspinwall, Fox Chapel, Sharpsburg, and O'Hara Townships.

"Often times, our service makes the difference between assisted living and independence," says Lois Folino of Fox Chapel, coordinator of Aspinwall Meals on Wheels and chair of the organization's board of directors.

Richard Hemphill, 87, of O'Hara can testify to that. "I'm not a cook; I don't pretend to be one," says the retired obstetrician. "Without this service, I'd have to go to a nursing home."

The program relies on nearly 75 volunteers per week to carry out its work, and Folino notes that sometimes those who make the deliveries are the only people some customers see all day.

"Our customers enjoy the human contact that our volunteers provide, and our volunteers see the difference they are making in the lives of the individuals they serve," she says. "It's a win-win."

Susan Glendenning, the organization's chef for the past 13 years, is sensitive to customers' dietary restrictions and preferences—not only those who are diabetic or watching their fat or salt intake, but also

Volunteer Dawn Kotanchik delivers lunch and dinner to Richard Hemphill at his O'Hara Township home.



Lois Folino of Fox Chapel, coordinator of Aspinwall Meals on Wheels, speaks to fellow volunteers at an event celebrating the organization's 40th anniversary.

those who eschew broccoli or want potatoes every day.

Dorothy Friedhof of O'Hara, 91, appreciates both the "out-of-this-world" food and the personal attention she receives from her regular delivery person, Dawn Kotanchik, who always greets her with a broad smile, brings in the mail, and chats for a few minutes. "I'm spoiled," Friedhof claims.

Kotanchik, who makes the rounds with her husband, Tony, enjoys the exchange, too. "The people we deliver to are so nice," she says.

Although many recipients are elderly, people of any age are eligible for Aspinwall Meals on Wheels, including those who require service only temporarily, as when recovering from surgery. Nor is income a factor. People living in houses of any size, from bungalows to mansions, may require food assistance in order to remain in the homes they love.

"My delivery route happens to be Fox Chapel and O'Hara," says Folino. "I can confirm that the need is there."

Volunteers also come from all age groups, income brackets, and walks of life. Folino says they need only commit to a few hours twice a month in order to make a difference. However, she observes that "Once they start volunteering, volunteers usually don't stop. The friendships and camaraderie



Volunteers enjoy their own meal—no wheels involved—as they celebrate the organization’s 40th anniversary with a luncheon at St. Edward Church in Blawnox.

that develop are quite special.” Some volunteers have been serving actively since the program was founded.

Barbara Baker of Fox Chapel has been involved since day one, beginning as a “bag lady” who packed the sandwiches, salads, fruit, milk, juice, and desserts that make up lunches for delivery. In the course of four decades she has known—and sometimes lost—many friends. She particularly recalls one customer from her early days who was blind. Despite his disability, every day he would prepare coffee in anticipation of her arrival, and the two would share pleasantries at the kitchen table. “It’s a bond that you have even when they’re gone,” Baker explains. “You always remember.”

Anne Casile wasn’t present on opening day, as Baker was, but joined up shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1975. A high-energy individual who is more comfortable serving than being served, she represents the qualities that make the volunteer force at Aspinwall Meals on Wheels so strong. “I can’t sit down,” she says, referring to her tendency to bustle about in any situation, seeking ways to lend a helping hand.



Current volunteers Barbara Baker (left) and Ann Casile (right) flank Doris Moon, who is retired from her Meals on Wheels duties. All three trace their association with the organization back to its beginning in 1975.

Casile recruited another long-serving volunteer, Gjerde Dansch of O’Hara, whom she met when their children were in elementary school together. “She used to be a friend of mine,” jokes Dansch, who has handled the volunteer schedule for the past 18 years.

Dansch started out as a driver, and in the summers would take her young children along on deliveries. Her daughter Rachael, 29, is now an Aspinwall Meals on Wheels driver herself.

Although Dansch praises her volunteers to the skies, she notes that some are reluctant to drive in extreme weather. “Wintertime can be really crazy,” she says, expressing a desire to enlist participants with vehicles equipped to drive in snowy weather.

Because Aspinwall Meals on Wheels receives no government funding, the generosity of donors is essential to supplement the modest client fees—currently \$6.50 per day for two home-delivered meals—that provide about 68 percent of the program’s funding.

While the need to raise funds and recruit volunteers is ongoing, Folino says the biggest challenge is to recruit more customers. “People are always surprised to hear that, but it is true,” she says, observing that people are often reluctant to acknowledge that they need assistance, either to themselves or others. According to Folino, it is usually the children, nieces and nephews, or neighbors of a potential recipient who make the call.

“We are making a difference in the lives of those we serve,” she says. “But we know there are more people out there who need us.” SA

To enroll in the program, become a volunteer, or donate, visit aspinwallmealsonwheels.org.