

Restaurants chip in to help Meals on Wheels program



Bill Wagner / The Daily News From left to right, Elizabeth Amador and Dawson Carter of Azteca restaurant and Lisa Chavez of CAP are hoping The Blue Hair Lady Margarita will be a potent fundraiser for Meals on Wheels.

By Brenda Blevins McCorkle / The Daily News | Posted: Wednesday, April 28, 2010

If not for the steaming fresh meals delivered to her door by the local Meals on Wheels program every weekday, Longview's Angie Pilat would have to struggle out of her wheelchair to make her own lunch.

She continues to live in her own home, something she said she cherishes after spending time in a local nursing home following knee and hip surgeries.

"It's cheaper, cheaper, for sure, and I can do what I want," said Pilat, who described her age as "going on 90."

The Meals on Wheels has delivered hot and frozen meals to local homebound seniors since 1979. Although CAP receives federal money to provide the meals, program coordinators must raise roughly \$70,000 a year to keep the services flowing, said Tammy Davies, CAP's Senior Services program manager. In 2009, CAP volunteers delivered more than 40,000 meals to homebound seniors.

To help raise the funds, 17 local restaurants are taking part in "Dine Out For Meals on Wheels" Tuesday. During the event, a percentage of the local restaurants' revenues will be donated to the program. Most will donate 20 percent, according to a CAP press release, but each restaurant determines its own percentage.

The money will help fund the meals that are delivered daily, which cooks begin preparing at 6 a.m. each day in the CAP kitchen, at the former Monticello hospital at Broadway and Seventh Avenue in Longview.

On Wednesday, Misty Middleton prepared carrots, while Keven Robinson, who has worked in the program for three years, hauled stainless steel containers of dinner rolls and other goodies from the walk-in freezer.

Sous chef Andre Foster said he enjoys his work in the often hectic kitchen. "It's a little stressful sometimes, trying to get everything out in a timely manner," he said.

For that day's meal, the cooks ladled spaghetti and meatballs into waxed cardboard containers, with garlic bread and vegetables nestled alongside. Once the plastic film is sealed over each meal, workers load them into soft-sided black coolers that help retain the meals' heat.

"We make sure that they're hot when they get there," Foster said. Robinson, who subs as a delivery driver when needed, likes seeing the outcome of his and his co-workers' efforts.

"It's fun to meet the seniors and know that they like the food and that they're getting a healthy meal," he said, smiling.

On that day, Lisa Chavez, CAP's coordinator for the Senior Nutrition Program, said she would do most of the delivering because of a shortage of volunteer drivers.

Her first stop was at Pilat's home, where the elderly woman's dog watched the action carefully.

Pilat said she would eat the meal while it's hot so she wouldn't have to try to reach her microwave, which hangs under her kitchen cabinets.

"It's not easy to get up out of the chair," she said.

Another meal recipient, 99-year-old Alma Day, said that although she has a "lovely gal" who shops for her, the delivered meals keep her from running out of food.

"Lisa has set me up nicely," she said. "They deliver Monday, Wednesday and Friday and on Friday, they bring me two frozen meals for the weekend."

When she told Chavez she also uses a nutrition drink, volunteers began delivering that with her meals as well.

"I'm very pleased and wouldn't want to be without it," she said. That doesn't surprise Davies. The service, she noted, is "vital." "Without it, a number of seniors would not be able to stay in their homes," Davies said. "And that would be sad for them and costly for the community to care for them in a nursing care facility."

The upcoming fundraiser is the first of its kind the Lower Columbia CAP has tried, but Davies said she's confident it will be popular.

"Another Community Action Program (CAP) in Bellingham has been doing this for the past 10 years, and they now have 40 restaurants participating," she said. "It's good for their businesses, and it's good for the community."

At the Kelso Azteca, owner Elizabeth Amador is going so far as to offer a special margarita in honor of the event.

The spirited concoction is called a "Blue Haired Lady" and is a potent mix that includes Blue Curacao, Midori liqueur and margarita mix with blue salt and orange juice. For each margarita sold in the month of May, Amador has pledged \$2 to the Meals on Wheels program.

In addition to raising money, the program's coordinators also hope to elevate the community's awareness of the program. Perhaps it might even bring in more volunteer drivers, Chavez said.

"Some deliver every day, Monday through Friday. Some once a week. We work with the volunteer's schedule," said Chavez.

In addition to individual volunteers, several local businesses take one day a week to deliver meals during their lunch hour, including Cascade Title, Cowlitz Bank and Fournier Insurance.

Sometimes, the volunteer might be one of the few outside contacts that a homebound senior has. Chavez said the service could not be provided without the help of the 30 volunteer drivers who make the deliveries.

Day said the volunteers make her meal that much more delicious, especially when she's not feeling so well.

"Everybody who comes is so gracious with their big smiles," she said. "That's good medicine."

For more information about Meals on Wheels or other senior services, go to www.lowercolumbiacap.org and see "Services."