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## Meals on Wheels delivers more than just food

Meals on Wheels program means more than just food

By Caroline Barrett Published 6:05 pm, Wednesday, February 24, 2016



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Arvid Oksa puts homemade sauce on the entree as hot meals are assembled by staff at the Meals on Wheels kitchen at the Capital South Campus Center - Trinity Alliance Friday Feb. 12, 2016 in Albany, N.Y. (Skip ... [more](#))

"There is my smile," [Marlene Straus](#) says, answering the door for her Meals on Wheels delivery. "I open the door and there he is. The smile is here."

Marlene is an elderly woman who lives with Sophie, her cat. In a room filled with colorful quilts and

blankets, Marlene moves about easily, despite using a wheelchair. Sophie curls on her own folded blanket, sleeping even with the commotion of a visitor.

The guy with the smile and the packages of food steps into her apartment. His name is **Joe Marcello**, Jr. and he delivers smiles, love, companionship and kindness with every meal. On a recent morning in Albany, he climbs into his Meals on Wheels delivery car, loaded up with food for seniors. Joe is a father, grandfather and husband who retired in 2011. After retiring, he fixed up his house. Traveled a bit. Then decided he needed something else to do. Answering an ad for a senior meal delivery person, Joe became a driver for Meals on Wheels. The job, he discovered, is way more than being a driver or food delivery person.

Every week, volunteers like Joe set out, cars full of meals, delivering to seniors across Albany County. Joe is one of 20 staff members, along with 450 volunteers, who come together to assist Albany County seniors through Meals on Wheels, which has been in service since 1986. Last summer, the organization moved into a new, 3,000-square-foot commercial kitchen in downtown Albany.

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Setting off on a very cold morning in February, Joe was dressed in jeans and a sweat shirt. The bitter temperatures don't seem to touch him as he parks in driveways, pulls out a big cooler and sorts bags by name. The delivery sites vary — old Victorian homes and small apartments. A few people wait at the door, and for him. At those places, he simply hands the bags over, most often to a caretaker.

At one delivery, a soft-spoken gentleman greets Joe at his apartment door. Homebound after a stroke, the man takes the meal bags and thanks Joe.

The man, who can move independently but doesn't have use of his right arm, has a son in Massachusetts, who visits when he can.

"Everything alright?" Joe asks the man. "You need anything?" It's the same routine for each client: the smile, then checking to be sure they are safe and all is OK. Finally, the food.

"This one is tough," Joe says pulling into a driveway in Albany close to the end of his route. "Yup, it's a hard one."

He lets himself in through the front door and opens the door to a bedroom on the ground floor, filled with mementos, knickknacks and pictures. In a hospital bed lies a small woman, curled in sleep. Joe calls out to her softly.

## More Information

### Just what does Meals on Wheels serve?

The meals vary from fish to beef Stroganoff and baked ziti. Emphasis is on making food appealing to seniors, while meeting federal guidelines for nutrition.

### Sample meal (Baked Fish Almondine):

Roasted white fish covered in a buttery sauce and topped with toasted almonds, mashed sweet potatoes, steamed cauliflower

### How to donate to Meals on Wheels

Sponsor a senior: \$35 feeds a senior for a week, \$140 feeds a senior for a month, \$1,800 feeds a senior for a year. All monetary contributions go directly to purchase, prepare and deliver food.

Donate stock

Donate used cars

People who can consistently give time

"Honey, it's Joe. I'm here with your food."

She lifts her head and opens her eyes, immediately reaching out her hand.

"You're here," she says, holding his hand. In a voice as tiny as her frame, she explains how she broke her hip and can no longer get out of bed. Her husband died years ago. No children. For a few minutes, she lights up, as she pulls herself upright and looks at Joe with big eyes. She holds onto Joe's hand and talks about the creche from Italy that sits on a dresser and a picture taken 50 years ago. But other clients await. Joe has to leave.

He shakes his head as he backs out of the driveway.

"That one is hard for me."

A lot has to happen before the meals are packed in bags and coolers for Joe and the other drivers to distribute. The food is prepared in the organization's commercial kitchen on Warren Street in Albany. Early every morning, chefs and

each week can call and volunteer. Meals on Wheels is always in need of volunteers.

Funds can be sent to Meals on Wheels, c/o Liz Hutson at 32 Essex St., Albany, NY 12206

For more information, contact Liz at 465-3322.

kitchen staff arrive and the process of feeding people begins. Each delivery includes one tray with a hot meal and one bagged meal with a sandwich, fruit, vegetable and dessert. The bagged meals are packed, with client names attached, in huge coolers. Hot meals are packed in special containers made to keep food warm.

**Monika Boeckmann** is executive director of the program, and she is equal parts cheerleader, disaster reliever and maestro. Her office hums. People walk in and out, interrupting her, asking

questions. Unflustered, she describes the contrast between the Meals on Wheels program and having frozen meals delivered (a cheaper alternative insurance companies would rather pay for.)

"The difference is putting eyes on people. You can't replace the human contact."

Smiles like Joe's go along with each meal, approximately 130,000 senior meals each year. Albany County pays for about 80,000 of those; the rest of the funding comes from grants, fundraising and clients buying their own meals.

"What this staff does for so little money and under difficult circumstances amazes me every day," Boeckmann says.

Around 8:30 a.m., the drivers began to trickle in. Kitchen staffers assemble around a machine with a conveyor belt. They work seamlessly, placing steaming hot fish into one compartment of a plastic tray, a scoop of sweet potato in another, and steamed cauliflower in the last. Full trays move down the line, and a machine seals them with plastic film before they're packed into bags and coolers. Three hundred and fifty meals go out like that, with only one tiny glitch. Milk is sent with each meal, a federal guideline. Someone notices that the order is short — there wasn't enough pints for the day's deliveries.

Monika searches the cooler, then calls the dairy.

"Our CFO is going over to pick up seven cases of milk. We all wear different hats," Monika says.

Crisis averted, she goes back in the kitchen to oversee the drivers as they head out.

The end of Joe's route brings him to Ohav Shalom towers and Marlene Straus. Marlene is the one who waits for Joe — and his smile. Very social and independent, she is unable to cook nutritious meals for herself and relies on the hot meals delivered during the week. On Friday, she receives two frozen meals that she can reheat and will help sustain her until Monday.

She has a daughter who lives in Chicago and friends she gathers with for game nights. Joe is a special friend, and she has been to his house for Thanksgiving and other family events.

"My wife and I always have room for one more at our table," Joe says. Thanksgiving and summer picnics and other special occasions, Joe drives his own car and brings clients to his home. Joe and Marlene converse easily, like two old friends. Joe's wife occasionally sends him out with small gifts, baked goods and such to give his clients.

"These people, they are my family," Joe says.

Before he leaves, Joe and Marlene discuss the details of a summer road trip to Olana, Frederick Church's historic estate in Hudson. She's always wanted to go, and they agree that summer would be a good time to enjoy the scenery, view the house and the grounds. There might even be a stop for ice cream after the tour.

With food delivered and safely stored in Marlene's refrigerator, and knowing she is safe and healthy, it's time for Joe to leave. She sees him to the door, still chattering about the trip.

Leaning in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek, he says goodbye.

"Honey, I'll see you next week," Joe calls as he closes the door.

"I know you will," she calls back, "and I'll be here waiting."

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