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THERE IS A FREE LUNCH: MIDDLETOWN SENIOR CENTER SPEARHEADS EFFORT TO HELP THOSE IN NEED

MIDDLETOWN – Behind her facemask, it's obvious Rosalie Weston has a smile on her face.

Senior Center Director Arleen Kaull and her lieutenant Chris Johnson are at Weston's door, a bag lunch in hand, checking in on the Oxbow Farms resident.

The dynamic duo have made such stops every weekday since March, part of a new outreach program by the town to help older residents who need a free midday meal to get them through the day in this COVID-19 world.

"It's a blessing," Weston said, holding the storm door open as she, Kaull and Johnson catch up. "They're so good to me. With everything going on right now, a lot of us need things like this. It makes me proud to be here, to live in a place that takes care of its own."

The message is similar across town among those participating in the program, which is run by the Senior Center and paid for by the town.

Some can't leave their homes, unable to drive or without transportation. Others are in the "at risk" category for COVID-19 and don't want to chance it going out. A bunch are just barely scraping by and might not have the money to get a good, regular meal.

For most, it's a lifeline to the rest of the world. Kaull and Johnson said there's no doubt the lunch drop off is the only human contact some have in a day.

At every stop, the two keep it positive, joking with each person and making them feel special for those few minutes.

It's not an act. Kaull and Johnson clearly care about every one of the people they come into contact with and want them to know they matter and the town's here to help.

"I don't know any other community that's doing this," said Kaull, obviously proud of the work she's doing. "We're really helping people here, directly, every day. Some towns have

meals, but they tell people to come get them. How do you do that when you can't drive or you don't have a car?"

"I knew a lot of people who are on our list, but not everyone," Johnson said. "It's really opened my eyes to our entire town and how there are some people who are barely making it. We have to do what we can to help each and every one of them."

Before they head out each day, Kaull and Johnson meet at the Senior Center on Green End Avenue. There, they sort out the prepared meals and repack them, knowing the preferences of their clients.

A few like juice, but not milk. A handful could use an extra cookie made by Nancy Carrol, one of Linda Johnson's cakes or second sandwich. Whatever it is, the two know as they move through the task quickly like a well-oiled machine. They also pack jigsaw puzzles, books or games for some, intended to help them pass the day.

After each brown paper bag is loaded, Kaull writes the client's name and puts a smiley face, a small gesture intended to brighten their day, even for just a moment.

One of the first things the senior center staff did when the building shut down was call every senior listed in town. From there, they gauged the need and offered the free lunches.

When the program started on March 16, Kaull and Johnson said they delivered to more than 40 homes. Now that some are more comfortable going out, that number has dropped to 32. Anyone looking to make a donation to the program can mail a check care of the "Middletown Senior Center Activity Fund."

"When we first started, I didn't know how it was going to work out," Kaull said. "We were so used to having everyone come to us, but it's gone so well, I get emotional about it. It's been such an eye opener and I can't tell you how uplifting this has been, to know we're helping."

"There are two days in my life right now I'm never going to forget," Johnson said. "Sept. 11 (2001) and March 16, when we closed. Everything has changed with what we do and it's going to be like this for awhile."

Once the lunches are packed, they're loaded into the Senior Center's gray bus and the two are on the road.

The first stop is at Harold Perlingiero's place on the east side of town. Formerly in construction before teaching, Perlingiero said he's a proud lifelong resident, all 90 years.

Going to school down the street at the old Paradise Schoolhouse, Perlingiero said he loves chatting with Kaull and Johnson – and hopes there's a seafood salad sandwich in the sack lunch.

“I look forward to it,” Perlingiero said, taking a break from chores around his house. “I can’t drive so something like this really helps out a lot.”

A few blocks away, Kay Borges agreed, saying it’s tough for her to get out because of COVID-19.

“I think what they’re doing is tremendous,” Borges said. “I can’t say enough good about them and their tuna fish is really good too.”

Down the street, Rose Faustino told Kaul she’s staying strong despite the adversity thrown her way.

“The lunches are always good and sometimes I save them for dinner,” Faustino said. “I can’t get out and as long as it’s not squash or beets, I’m eating it.”

If it was up to Ramona Perham in Oxbow Farms, an extra cookie in her lunch would make her day even more.

“Those are the best,” Perham said, laughing. “I’m not sure where they get them, but they are good. Everything is. It’s great being a Middletown resident. I know this might sound silly, but it makes me proud, every time they’re here.”

When the bus pulls into Claudia Cinotti’s driveway around the corner, Johnson honks the horn as Kaul gets out of the vehicle. The two women catch up like old friends, chatting about the latest with COVID-19 and happenings.

“This means a lot,” Cinotti said. “Times are tough and things only go so far. When the food and OJ run out, they run out and I know if I didn’t get this, I’d be in really tough shape.”

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