

Why I Drive Meals on Wheels

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I ring the doorbell and announce my presence. It takes a few moments, but soon Anita comes around the corner, her shuffling footsteps gradually bringing her nearer to the front door. She has a big smile on her face. I wait patiently. After all, Anita is just two months shy of 98 years old, still living on her own in a neatly-kept condo. I open the screen door and hand the diminutive, white-haired woman a plastic bag containing her lunch. “I put a loaf of bread in there for you, Anita. I know you like the kind with seeds.”



“Oh, thank you so much,” she replies as she takes the bag. “I do love that bread.” Anita’s hands are full, so I close the door for her. I walk back to my car and drive to the next client’s home.

Anita is one of the sixteen clients I will serve today on my weekly Meals on Wheels route. Each Tuesday morning, I pick up prepared meals from a local senior center and drive a route in Milwaukie, Oregon, a suburb on the southeast side of Portland, as I have for nearly eleven years. I have met many very nice senior citizens and people with disabilities in that time. Almost without exception, they have been pleasant people who are grateful that someone is making their lives a bit easier. Having someone stop by regularly helps keep people with limited mobility connected to others, ensures that they get at least one solid and well-balanced meal per day, and permits a quick wellness check.

Those wellness checks can be important. Cynthia did not answer when I rang her doorbell one day. I heard a faint voice calling from inside her apartment. She had fallen on the floor just a few feet from the door and could not get up. I knew she wore an emergency call button on a cord around her neck, but she was lying on it and couldn’t reach the button to summon help. Her door was locked. I checked with a neighbor and looked for the apartment manager, but no one could open the door.

Running out of ideas, I called the Meals on Wheels coordinator, who then called 911. She also sent another driver to complete my route. I waited there until the firemen arrived. They positioned a ladder and began to climb toward an open upstairs window above Cynthia’s door, until a neighbor pointed out that that window belonged to a different apartment. A fireman finally coaxed Cynthia to crawl toward the door and

unlock it. Problem solved. Had I not just happened to stop by then to deliver a meal, poor Cynthia could have been lying there undiscovered for who knows how long.

People receive Meals on Wheels for a variety of reasons. Most are elderly people who cannot readily get out to shop for themselves. I have served some of those people on my route for years. Other clients are recovering from surgery or an injury and need help for just a short time, like the 90-year-old woman who asked me to cut her meat for her because she had fallen and broken both arms. My routes also have included several people with severe disabilities, ranging from total blindness to a woman whom I have rarely seen out of her hospital bed. One client was a quadriplegic in his forties who broke his neck in a diving accident many years earlier. It's not always apparent what sort of disability a client has—some are psychological—but that is not mine to judge.

A powerful motivation for becoming a volunteer driver is to imagine that a client is your own mother, your grandfather, or even yourself following a debilitating health event. Naturally, you would hope that people close to you who need assistance could get it. Being a driver is a way of paying it forward. I estimate that I have delivered about 8,200 meals to date. I hope I never need anyone to bring food to me, but perhaps I've accrued a bit of a cosmic credit if it does become necessary someday.

Meals on Wheels tries to help people remain in their own homes longer than they might be able to otherwise. After my father died, my mother, then in her late seventies, lived alone in her home in Boise, Idaho, for another three years. I became concerned that she might not be eating properly on her own. She also lacked social interaction, because she didn't live in the kind of neighborhood where neighbors would drop in for coffee and to see how she was doing. Mom looked into getting Meals on Wheels, but they did not deliver to her area. My siblings and I eventually persuaded Mom to move into a nice independent-living apartment in a retirement community a few miles from her house. Ironically, the food pickup site for drivers in the meals program was now just twenty feet outside her new apartment's door. Oh, well.

I need to make sure each of my clients receives the right food items. Everyone receives a tray that contains a hot entree plus two servings of fruit, vegetables, or salads, along with a second container that holds some salad, fruit, dessert, or something similar. Those who have requested it receive a small carton of milk with each meal. A few people get a special meal, such as diabetic, dairy-free, or with entrees that avoid certain meats. We don't deliver on weekends or holidays, but clients can request frozen meals to be delivered in advance for those days. Local bakeries often donate loaves of bread. Some clients want white bread, others prefer the bread with seeds, and a few don't want any bread at all. It gets a bit complicated.

It's easy to make an error with so many possible combinations, especially if I'm substituting on a day when people get something different than they do on my usual Tuesdays. I've had to backtrack more than once to pick up a carton of milk from someone who wasn't supposed to get it that day. Fortunately, I've never given one of my clients any food that could harm them. I did come close once, though. I overlooked a

special meal for a new client on a day when I was distracted by training a new driver. I felt terrible about my mistake. I fretted all weekend and was tremendously relieved to learn that no damage was done.

I can attest to the quality of the meals that come out of our center. There's a protocol to follow when a client doesn't answer the door. The driver leaves a card indicating that delivery was attempted, and we notify the program coordinator so she can do a wellness check on the client. The drivers also have the option of taking home any undelivered meals. Often they look and smell very good, so I have tried quite a few of them. I must say, the kitchen does an impressive job of preparing appealing institutional meals. They are tasty enough that sometimes I privately hope that one of my clients isn't home so I can take the leftover meal myself.

Delivering meals has opened my eyes to some usually unseen aspects of my community. When you drive down the major streets in a town, you might not be aware that just off those streets lie extensive apartment complexes and trailer parks. I had no idea how many such residential clusters existed in the town of Milwaukie. I know the community much better now after driving so many roads for so long.

I've met many interesting folks on my route. I noticed that one client, a man of about 94, had a large model of an old airplane in his condo. Being a student of military history, I recognized it as a World War II B-17G bomber. In chatting with him, I learned that Fred had been a navigator on a B-17 in Europe. He had been wounded in the eye with a bit of shrapnel from an antiaircraft shell on one mission. Fortunately, he recovered just fine. Another client had been a flight engineer on a Marine Corps aircraft in the Pacific theater during the war. I found it fascinating to talk with these war veterans, members of the Greatest Generation. Everyone has a story to tell, if you take the time to ask.

There is a down side to working with elderly people and those with serious health issues: sometimes they die. One year, four people on my route passed away. Sometimes it is not unexpected, as I see a client failing from week to week. Other times, though, it comes as a surprise. One day I went to deliver a meal to Jerry, who was about 82, only to be told by his downstairs neighbor that Jerry had died the night before. The neighbor heard a thud above his kitchen, and that was that for Jerry. That's not a bad way to go, if you ask me.

People leave the route for various other reasons too. They move in with a relative, go into a nursing home, or go into the hospital but don't return to their apartment. It's sad, because I become rather fond of seeing these people for a few moments every week. People like Dorothy, nearly 97, who is just the sweetest lady and who has to purée all of her food because of a throat problem. Dorothy looks so cute in her apron. And then there was Albert and his tiny little wife, Susie, both in their 90s. Albert used to present the largest box of Whitman's chocolate candies I've ever seen and invite me to take an "energy pill" home with me.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the oldest clients on my routes have been women. The few men who make it into their 90s in good shape—relatively spry and mentally sharp—are all skinny little guys. This observation has motivated me to keep my own weight down in hope of matching their extended healthy longevity.

Delivering Meals on Wheels is not for everyone. When a new volunteer comes along, our Meals coordinator asks an experienced driver to show them the route and train them in the process. Most of the new drivers work out fine. I trained one young man, though, who decided prematurely that he was ready to do the job. Even though he had committed to drive a route the next week, he didn't show up. No one ever heard from him again. That's just rude. The clients still must eat, so if a driver doesn't show up to do the job as promised, someone else has to fill in on very short notice.

At 65, I am one of the younger drivers in our group. Most are retired people in their 60s and 70s, though a few are younger. One couple who deliver together has been married some 64 years. I can only hope I will still be doing something useful for my community if I reach their age.

I don't know what motivated my fellow drivers to volunteer for Meals on Wheels. But I know why I drive. My father grew up during the Great Depression in a badly broken family. He told me when I was young that he would never send one of his children to bed without dinner as punishment, because he knew what it was like to be three days hungry. I was horrified at that concept. I still am.

The most fundamental right of every human being is the right to adequate nutrition. That's why I devote a couple of hours each week to delivering nutritional meals to people who might otherwise eat poorly that day. It's the least I can do for my neighbors.