Catholic Center staff feeds the hungry

BY PATRICK J. BUECHI
Staff Reporter

The good work at the Catholic Center doesn’t slow down during lunchtime. A group of volunteers uses that time to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty through Meals on Wheels.

Each Wednesday, a team of two people, a driver and a runner, stops by the Richmond-Summer Senior Center to pick up hot and cold healthy meals for a half dozen senior neighbors. Then they deliver them, while checking to make sure the client is all right. Each client receives a lunch and dinner, with juice and dessert. The nutritionally balanced meals offer 75 percent of the daily nutrition that they need.

Paula Pericozzi, data specialist and website coordinator for Catholic Education, serves as team leader for the downtown Catholic Center. She organizes the 16 volunteers, who take turns delivering meals.

During last Thanksgiving, Pericozzi volunteered with Meals on Wheels in her own Lancaster neighborhood. She wanted to continue helping, but the organization only delivers Monday through Friday, when she is at work. The Adopt-a-Route program allows people to volunteer during their lunch hours, customizing routes to fit delivery stops into the allotted time. She quickly found more than enough coworkers who wanted to help.

“It’s really easy to do. They’re very explicit directions — what houses to go to, where to go to,” she explained. “They gave us a little instructional class at the beginning. When you bring the person their meal, you check on them and make sure they’re OK, make sure they don’t have any medical issues or anything like that.”

All volunteers need to be able to do is drive and carry the meals. Meals on Wheels gives the teams detailed notes on where to drive, what door to use and what to watch out for in terms of pets, health issues and where to place the food. Pericozzi said Meals on Wheels is very helpful when a scheduling conflict occurs.

Pericozzi became aware of the need for such a program after dealing with her parents’ struggle with Alzheimer’s.

“I know how difficult it is for elderly people who can’t get out, who really are homebound and really do need somebody to bring the meals. I think it’s better for folks to be able to stay in their homes as long as they want to. This is one way we can help them,” she said. “The first week I did it, I was just amazed at some of the folks...
Angry through Meals on Wheels

Diocese of Buffalo employees Mike Slish and Sarah Leahy pick up their Meals on Wheels meals at the Summer Street Senior Center.

and how grateful they were. Every one of them was waiting for me at the door. Every one of them thanked me 20 times for bringing it to them. It just took me an hour of my day, but it made their day that we would do this for them.”

Dennis Mahaney, director of Evangelization and Parish Life, volunteered to experience the person-to-person service he enjoys.

“It was fun,” he said. “Everybody was so pleasant when we approached the door. You could tell everyone is appreciative. There’s that sense of personal contact. It’s as rewarding for us as it is for the people who get the food.”

Coincidentally, within a couple weeks of agreeing to participate, Mahaney’s father became one of the homebound seniors on the receiving end of the meals. “So, now I’m part of making something happen that’s part of the larger picture with my own father. It gave me a sense of confidence, because he started asking questions. I said, ‘Well, Dad, when we do it in Buffalo this is the way it happens, so you shouldn’t worry.’ So, of course, it put him at ease.”

Volunteering at the office has led to one person to volunteer at home as well. Sarah Leahy, ministry development coordinator with the diocesan Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, now delivers meals on her days off. It has turned into a teaching moment with her son.

“Afler learning more about Meals on Wheels through work, I was motivated to volunteer weekly during one of my days off with my 3-year-old son at both the Lancaster and Depew sites,” she said. “It’s something that had crossed my mind in the past, but Paula’s organization and excitement of doing it through the Catholic Center pushed me to actually volunteer in my community as well. It’s hard to find volunteer opportunities for parents to do with small children, and Meals on Wheels has been a really good experience for both my son and I. We enjoy delivering meals, but also being present to the clients and making them smile. It has given my son and me the opportunity to talk more about love, compassion and solidarity, and to pray for the clients together when we are back home.”

Since its founding in 1969, the Meals on Wheels for WNY mission has been focused on the most basic, most critical of home needs offering nutritious food and a friendly visits to enrich lives and promoting independent healthy living.