



The remnants of horse-and-wagon days lie dormant in this old barn, now a storage bin for corn cobs, riding tack and an unused wagon. Staff photographer Allen Jernigan found the barn in the country between I-40 and the airport. While the late afternoon sun sets, this scene seems a stark contrast to the busy farm that surrounds it.

## Mobile meals service sends good food, company to invalids, elderly who otherwise go hungry

By MICHELE MECKE  
Staff Writer

"God bless you," the blind, white-haired black man called out to the two women as they left his yellow frame house.

The women hear that a lot. They are volunteers for the Chapel Hill Meals on Wheels program, which brings a hot meal each day to persons who might not otherwise get one.

While the program serves anyone either temporarily or permanently unable to cook a meal for himself, most of its clients are old and sick, and many are poor.

The Meals on Wheels volunteers deliver a hot, balanced meal from the N.C. Memorial Hospital cafeteria to these persons each weekday.

But they take their responsibilities further than that. The volunteers also check on everything about the client — from his health to the working condition of his TV set — and make referrals to the proper county agencies if other help is necessary.

"A big part of this is referrals — getting people in to help these people," says Florence Soltys, former coordinator of the program.

Another big part of their service is the social contact the volunteers provide to their clients, some of whom see few other persons.

"Social contact is sometimes more important than the food," Soltys says. "A lot of these people really improve with the social contact."

Jeannie Browning, one of the program's 65 volunteers, says, "We give them security. They know we love them. We see so much improvement."

Browning describes an elderly mother and retarded daughter to whom she has been delivering meals each week. At first the daughter, who suffers from seizures, was unintelligible to the volunteers. "But now she says words, and we can understand her," she said.

Most of the volunteers form strong attachments to the persons they serve. Like the elderly black woman in a wheelchair who has had both legs amputated but remains in good spirits. Or the lonely man with wispy white hair sitting in a room, surrounded by family pictures. Or the week black woman, confined to her bed, who

asks the woman to pray for her.

There is a sense of caring between volunteers and clients. Cupcakes are sent out with the meals on birthdays, and Browning brought Thanksgiving dinner from her own family's turkey to her clients who had no other holiday meal.

And most volunteers find their work rewarding. "We just love them dearly," Browning says. "They say we're a blessing to them, but they're a blessing to us."

Sang Ei Kim, Browning's partner delivering meals each Friday, finds that the program gives an insight into another side of the generally affluent and fortunate Chapel Hill area. "They help us see things differently," she says.

The Chapel Hill program started in October 1976 following a hunger conference at Chapel of the Cross. Persons receiving the meals pay whatever they can, anywhere from \$2.25 to nothing. The deficit is made up primarily by area churches, with some help from businesses and individuals.

The volunteers serve an average of 25 to 35 Orange County residents each weekday. The clients are broken up into five geographic routes and are served by a different pair of volunteers each day.

The five pairs of volunteers a client sees each week are kept as constant as possible, however, so the client will be able to "develop some rapport with the volunteers and the volunteers will be able to notice and report any changes," Soltys says.

Clients can seek out the program themselves or they can be referred through the North Carolina Memorial Hospital, a minister or a social service agency. Although most are elderly, some are not. "We've even had students with hurt backs who could not get up to cook on the program temporarily," Soltys says.

Unlike most Meals on Wheels programs throughout the United States, the Chapel Hill program receives no federal funds. At the program's inception, its board of directors decided not to apply for federal funds because that would, in effect, exclude persons from the program who could afford the food but who were not physically able to prepare it.

"In Chapel Hill, it (receiving federal funds) would be too restrictive," Soltys says. "We wouldn't be able to service some people."

So the program continues through contributions and the donation of time by volunteers. The volunteers come mostly from area churches, Soltys says, "but anyone is welcome. The program also has a paid coordinator who works four hours each day and receives \$250 per month."

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