

News

# More than a Meal: 'Meals on Wheels' drivers are part of seniors' lives

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Meals on Wheels drivers do not just deliver food, they are also an integral part of seniors' lives, sometimes being the only face a senior sees each day in a time of severe isolation for many elderly people.

Ruth Stratton, a Meals on Wheels driver for the Senior Community Center of Owensboro-Daviess County, said that at 80 years old, she never would have expected to be doing this job. But she enjoys it, along with the connections she is able to make with many of the Meals on Wheels clients she delivers to each day.

Stratton said she has been delivering meals for about six months.

She said she has gotten so close with one client that they joke about adopting each other as family members.

Many of her clients wait at the doors for her to arrive and wave goodbye to them at the windows when they leave.

Stratton said for many, Meals on Wheels drivers are the only people they see on a regular basis. Those reasons may vary, from having no nearby family or friends to maybe not having children or other close family members.

"We are the only ones," she said. "I enjoy going to their homes and checking on them, seeing what they're doing and what their needs are. Some of them want me to come in and sit down and talk with them."

She said she sometimes takes extra items to her clients, if she is able to. One client, she said, had talked regularly about how much she wanted fresh tomatoes, so Stratton picked up tomatoes for her at the grocery store and brought them on her next delivery.

Meals on Wheels driver Bonnie Reynolds said for many of her clients, she has become part of their daily lives, with many of them being isolated from others.

"We've become part of their family," she said. "They're very lonesome. It's heart wrenching, really."

She said drivers do much more than deliver meals, they also look for any other potential needs the senior might have and are able to reach out to the Green River Area Development District Aging Services and inform them of certain needs to make sure seniors do not get left behind.

"There are services available to help with that, but most of them don't know, and the ones that don't have family with regular interactions, they get left behind," she said. "That's what GRADD does, but it takes somebody in there every day sometimes to realize they're missing something."

She said if a family is not able to visit often, they may not see that the senior is declining or does not have access to certain daily needs. Drivers, however, are seeing these seniors each day and have regular access to them.

Driver Cindy Aldridge said she started the job for some extra income and to have something to do during her retirement, but it has turned into much more than that.

"I get attached very quickly, anyway," she said. "I'm a people person, I love it. A lot of them are just very appreciative of what you do. They just act like you are just doing them such a favor."

Aldridge got emotional as she spoke of one of her clients that recently passed away that she had grown close to, even taking him home-cooked meals on occasion.

"I was the only person he saw other than his neighbor," she said. "He never had visitors, and he hadn't been out of his house in about a year-and-a-half due to COVID. He was just petrified, and he had one arm that was paralyzed, and so when I went in, I'd always stay a few extra minutes, and I'd open up everything for him and sit and talk to him for a little bit.

"I'd gotten to where sometimes, whenever I would cook at home — he loved fried potatoes, so I'd take him fried potatoes and green beans. He was just a great man, and he was so lonely."

She said she regularly assisted him with reordering his medications and setting up doctors appointments through home healthcare services.

Meals on Wheels driver Melissa Tucker said she has been delivering meals since the beginning of COVID and has seen how the pandemic has really affected many of the seniors she sees on a regular basis — many of whom are afraid to get out of their homes — and has seen some dire situations.

"I had one client who didn't have any family in this town at all, and I was literally the only face she saw every day, so she banked on seeing us during COVID, and she never left her home because she was scared of COVID," she said. "That was probably the most heart-wrenching moment that I've had since I started."

Tucker said on her current route, she has about four seniors who are isolated in their home, two of which do not have family nearby to visit with them on a regular basis.

She said drivers see their senior clients through major life happenings, such as losing family members, grieving and sometimes, losing the clients themselves.

"For me, the saddest part is even when they do have kids and family, sometimes they don't see those kids very often ... so they love to have that interaction, so for me, it's been rewarding to get to talk to them," she said. "We don't get to spend a whole lot of time, but some time, so that's been my experience, which is why I'm still doing this."

Tucker said she feels she is helping her community in some way by doing what she is doing and wishes others would get more involved and volunteer for other programs that help benefit seniors, such as the "Senior Companion" volunteer program through GRADD that allows individuals to visit with seniors in their community that may not have the opportunity to interact with others very often.

"For me, it's rewarding ... just to see them smiling when you get to that door and just to wave at you and be so grateful that you're coming by to see them and talk to them," she said. "It would be nice if we had a lot more help, even somebody to just go sit and talk to these seniors. There's programs where they can go and visit with seniors.

"With over 300 clients, it wouldn't hurt to have some more people that would be willing to do stuff like this because we can't — we have a timeframe. We have only so much time to give them their tray and get back again."

Anyone interested in seeking more information about or applying for the “Senior Companion” program can visit [Audubon-Area.com/Social.html](http://Audubon-Area.com/Social.html).

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