

Beth Ashley: Volunteer free-food program at Hamilton helps low-income elders, builds camaraderie

Staff Report

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MARCIA COOK has assembled a small stash of food - mostly bread and fresh vegetables - on the shelf in front of her, planning to take it home for a meal or two or even a party for friends.

She is one of a couple of dozen people who have come to a basement area of the Villas at Hamilton Field to take advantage of an every-Wednesday free food day.

"The food is wonderful," says Cook, a regular customer. "I've been off work for awhile and it's a great help."

Cook, 60, is a participant in an all-volunteer food program called Respecting Our Elders. It was founded two years ago by Ruth Schwartz and Curt Kinkead, a married couple who live at the Villas, a subsidized housing complex in Novato.

Four days a week, shelves in the basement area are laden with donated food from Trader Joe's, Starbucks and the Terra Linda Safeway. Residents in the 128-unit Villas complex are welcome to drop in and help themselves, no questions asked.

When they are through, leftover food is bundled up and taken to other group residences - 19 of them - across Marin. Wednesday's bounty will go to Nova-Ro I and II and Casa Nova in Novato.

The program, says Schwartz, gives a lift to low-income seniors whose incomes are high enough to bar them from welfare assistance, but not enough to pay for luxuries or fun.

"Needy seniors are the most under-served people in our society," says Kinkead, 65, who drives his food-laden pickup truck seven days a week from one end of Marin to the other. He had been a volunteer for 30 years in a similar food giveaway in Lafayette, before he and his wife moved to the Villas 31½ years ago.

Wafi Ziani, 67, is another Wednesday customer, putting fresh fruits and vegetables into a paper bag (on a good day he also gets meat and chicken) before setting it down to help load Kinkead's truck. Like most of the people who benefit from the program, he is a volunteer, too.

"This helps financially," he says. "But I also enjoy it because I am giving help and health to other people."

Villas resident Jerry Bakken says the program has been a boon to those who are forced to live in "genteel poverty."

"So much of our income goes to housing and medical expenses, there is little left over for food."

Another bonus, says Schwartz, 62, is the neighborliness the program has fostered.

Working together, residents have become caring friends.

"It has given me another family," says Cook.

At other senior complexes, Kinkead delivers the food, but leaves it in the hands of residents to distribute. That dynamic brings people together.

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Roy Chan, manager of the San Rafael Commons, where some of the food is delivered, says "a lot of our people appreciate it very much. It's very helpful."

Nova Ro I manager Ella Tumlin agrees. "It's a wonderful program run by wonderful people," she says. The food - bread, meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables - is "very well used by the residents."

Schwartz and Kinkead say their operation does not compete with the Marin Community Food Bank, a 26-year-old agency that offers free food to the needy at its Novato facility and twice a month at appointed distribution centers. Among the differences: food bank customers must meet certain income qualifications - Respecting Our Elders is open to anyone - and much of its food is non-perishable packaged and canned goods. Its brown bag distributions contain fresh food supplements, according to director Anne Rogers.

The agencies have accommodated each other when it comes to picking up leftover or outdated foods from donors like Trader Joe's: because the food bank is closed on Fridays, it made no sense for its staff to pick up Trader Joe's food at noon Friday and hold it for 72 hours. Now the food bank gets Trader Joe's donations on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, and Respecting Our Elders the rest of the week.

The program operates "for the cost of keeping my pickup on the road," plus car insurance and a small sum for paper and plastic bags and other items, Kinkead says. Supporters (Schwartz calls them their "financial family") give the program about \$300 a month.

Schwartz, who is president of the nonprofit, says she and Kinkead declined to take salaries for their work "because 'all-volunteer' is much more aligned with the flavor of what we're doing. There's a stigma to organizations with too much overhead."

Other volunteers help Kinkead with driving, but he is on the road seven days a week. He takes food to facilities from Marin City to Point Reyes Station. The program, he says, serves 2,000 households.

"It's the most satisfying work I've ever done," says Schwartz, a technical writer who once guided whale-watching cruises in Southern California.

Schwartz left an executive position with a graphic design and marketing firm four years ago and has since opened her own consulting business. She also does direct sales for the Cookie Lee Jewelry Co.

She says she loves the Respecting Our Elders program because outdated food doesn't end up in Dumpsters and low-income seniors no longer go hungry; some can save enough money to buy a TV or go to the movies.

"It helps build community," Schwartz says. "People relate to each other, they take care of each other. We effect that in a very big way.

"And - on a personal level - my husband is the happiest he has been in his whole life."

The program, she says, "is awesome."

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