

# Meals on Wheels Nourishes the Soul

By Diane Claytor



Joan Liever, at right, hands Lamorinda client Mable Betancourt her daily nutritious meal. Photos D. Claytor

Last week, Mable Betancourt enjoyed a dinner of hearty beef stew, steamed spinach, corn niblets, and a freshly made biscuit. Later this week, the long-time Lamorinda resident will dine on roast beef with gravy, baked potato, spinach salad, broccoli and a brownie for dessert.

Betancourt, along with almost 30 other elderly Lamorindans, is a client of Meals on Wheels and Senior Outreach Services (MOWSOS), one of four organizations that deliver nutritious meals to frail, homebound seniors throughout Contra Costa County who have no other viable way of receiving a good, balanced meal.

As a young girl, Betancourt's family spent summers in Lamorinda, leaving their Oakland home for the warmer climate and resort-like environment. In 1948, Betancourt moved to the area permanently.

She still lives in that same house and still "takes advantage of the beautiful view," she said with a twinkle in her eye. Ten years ago, when she was no longer able to drive or cook for herself, Betancourt contacted MOWSOS.

Meals on Wheels (MOW) originated in Britain during the Blitz. The Women's Volunteer Service for Civil Defense began bringing meals to the many people who, injured in the war, were convalescing at home. The U.S. home-delivered meal program began in Philadelphia in 1954 and has been growing ever since. In 1990, the charitable nonprofit Meals on Wheels of Contra Costa (MOWCC) was formed to bring together — and help finance — the various public and nonprofit agencies involved in providing Meals on Wheels services throughout the county. At that time, approximately 600 seniors were receiving daily meals at home. Today, with the coordinating assistance of three MOW nonprofit agencies and MOWCC, there are 90 local Meals on Wheels routes with volunteer drivers delivering meals to 1,650

homebound seniors, rain or shine, five days a week.

The Lamorinda area has two routes and is serviced through MOWSOS based in Walnut Creek.

Clients may also receive two frozen meals so they have delicious healthy meals on the weekends. Additionally, there are 17 cafes, typically located in senior centers around the county, serving another 650 daily meals to older people who come together to dine and socialize.

Bateman Senior Meals in Antioch prepares these meals. "There are, of course, nutritional requirements and alterations for people with dietary restrictions," Paul Kraitz, co-founder and secretary/treasurer of MOWCC, said. "Every month, representatives from the cafes, the MOW organizations and the caterer, meet to discuss last month's meals. We take a look at what was liked and not liked, and then plan future menus, always taking into consideration nutrient needs," he noted.

There are no income requirements for MOW clients and they do not have to pay anything. Basically, Kraitz stated, the only conditions are that the recipient is unable to drive and has no other viable way to receive a nutritious meal. Martha Carlson, MOWCC's community engagement specialist, said, "We encourage our seniors to go to one of the Cafes, because then they get their meal as well as the opportunity to socialize. But if that's not possible, MOW happily delivers and for many seniors, this delivery is the only thing that keeps them from malnutrition."

Volunteers are the backbone of the MOW program and currently "there is a dedicated army of more than 800," Kraitz reported. Some have been delivering for over 20 years.

"Volunteers are the eyes and ears of this program," Jennifer Gomes-Figueira, county field nutrition assistant, said. "In addition to being trained in food safety, our volunteers are taught

to watch for any physical or mental changes in their clients and report them immediately," she said. "We're always looking out for the well-being of our clients."

The average age for MOW clients is 80 years. Lamorinda clients tend to be slightly older, "upper 80's to low 90's," according to Gomes-Figueira. "In fact, we have two clients in Lamorinda turning 100 within the next few months," she said. Betancourt is one of them, although you'd never know it by looking at her. The former school librarian is friendly and alert, happily welcoming visitors into her small, tidy home.

Volunteer Joan Liever has been delivering meals to Betancourt and approximately 15 other Lamorindans every week for 10 years. "When I decided to volunteer," Liever said, "I had no idea how wonderful this would be in my life. These seniors are amazing; they invite you into their homes, tell you their stories." Every Tuesday morning, Liever goes to the MOWSOS office, picks up her list of recipients and loads her meals into her car. Then she drives around Lamorinda, greeting each of "her seniors" with a warm smile and a nutritious meal. "Some only want to be handed their meal while others appreciate a short visit. One woman would ask me in to help her put together a puzzle," Liever remembered. "I'd spend 10 minutes and could tell what a difference it made for her. And then there's Mable, who is one of the kindest, most generous people I've ever met."

Liever typically saves Betancourt for the end of her delivery period so they can spend extra time together. They hug, they laugh and Liever listens as Betancourt regales her with yet another story. "I think of this program as so much more than simply food nourishment," Liever stated. "It's nourishment for the soul."

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Meals on Wheels volunteer Joan Liever picks up the meals she's getting ready to deliver to Lamorinda clients.