

Inclusion at every door as Sunshine Communities joins Mobile Meals on a mission to serve

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Sunshine Communities volunteer Tammy delivers Mobile Meals to Jacqueline Burmeister on March 27 in Swanton.

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Tammy, a Sunshine Communities volunteer with developmental disabilities, said, “This is my favorite job,” as she delivered prepared meals to elderly community members.

In an effort named Choose to Include, the nonprofit has partnered with Mobile Meals of Toledo to turn a routine service into a rolling lesson in inclusion.

By inviting Sunshine Communities’ clients with developmental disabilities to help deliver meals across northwest Ohio, both organizations — and the broader community — are winning.

“I like going out, meeting people out in the community. They're really great,” Tammy said.

Based in Maumee, Sunshine Communities supports individuals of all ages with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The organization provides residential, vocational, and day programs that help people feel included in their community.

On Friday, as they have for the past six months, volunteers climbed into a van, swung by Dunkin’ for coffee, and then headed to Swanton to deliver Mobile Meals to neighbors who need a little extra help.

“It's actually pretty amazing. We have a lot of volunteers and donors that give to Sunshine on a weekly basis,” said Mike Bauder, a direct support professional. “This opportunity for us came up, and it was our chance to give back to the community that supports us.”

Every Friday, that “give back” looks like a friendly knock at the door for people like Jackie Burmeister, 81, who now counts the crew as part of her own weekly routine.

“I think it's wonderful. They get the [volunteers] out, and Tammy is my favorite because she's just so lovable. She gave me a big hug the first day I met her,” Ms. Burmeister said.

The meals have also become a practical lifeline. Some mornings, basic tasks can feel daunting for someone with health issues, so the ready-to-heat meals help her start the day with less pain and more peace.

“I have arthritis in my hips and my back” making it difficult to stand up some mornings she said, noting that being able to pop a prepared meal into the microwave “is just wonderful.”

Headquartered in downtown Toledo, Mobile Meals works to help clients remain independent and improves their quality of life by delivering nutritious meals to homebound, elderly, and physically disabled individuals across the greater Toledo area.

Just a few doors away, 63-year-old Donna Masne has her own reasons for cherishing the weekly knock on the door. She lives with physical limitations that make cooking a challenge.

She sees the program as a dignified way to maintain her independence.

“I have a lot of disability in my hands and just strength in general, so for someone else to cook it and then I eat it works better,” she said, adding that the meals also help stretch her tight budget.

But for Ms. Masne, the deeper impact is what the deliveries say about people like Ryan, a 43-year-old Sunshine participant who rides along with Mr. Bauder and other volunteers to bring meals to their neighbors.

Watching him show up, week after week, she sees more than charity — she sees respect.

“I think it's awesome because people like him need to have responsibility and be treated like a responsible young man,” she said.

For Ryan, who has developmental disabilities and some physical challenges, it is simple — he likes to help. When asked what he enjoys about making deliveries, he answered in a straightforward way: “Yeah, helping people.”

With March being Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, that spirit is exactly what Sunshine Communities hopes to spotlight.

Through its Choose to Include campaign, volunteers and Mobile Meals clients are aiming to model what inclusion looks like. That is, neighbors helping neighbors and people with developmental disabilities stepping into visible, valued roles.

“Awareness is important; action is transformational,” Mallery Crooks, director of marketing and communications, for Sunshine Communities said in a news release.

“Choose to Include is about finding a local event, swapping your coffee or lunch spot for a place that supports people with developmental disabilities, or simply sharing a connection,” she said.