

*St. Barnabas Senior Center contracts with St. Vincent's Meals on Wheels program to prepare and deliver meals to homebound seniors. Following is an account by a USC student who volunteered for the Meals on Wheels program.*

When I imagined my day at St. Vincent's Meals on Wheels I pictured myself in a white apron, lovingly chopping vegetables and adding pinches of this and that to a large bubbling tureen. Instead, my assignment consisted of placing 25 small containers onto large metal trays, although I did get to wear the apron.

I was impressed by the sheer amount of food in the kitchen. I think I just don't have a mental concept of how much food is required to make over 2,000 meals, but it seemed everywhere I looked there were vats and boxes of food.

I also noticed the small details that were given great attention—the woman serving the orange slices had several different serving sizes to make. I overheard her being told that she should make 40 servings with 3 slices and 50 servings with 6 slices as well as several other order sizes. The different amounts were for people with different dietary needs—I had not realized the amount of calculation that goes into creating the various types of meals offered by St. Vincent's.

After working in the kitchen, I joined a woman named Connie and the Director of Volunteers, Carol, on a delivery route. This was the most memorable part of the day. Carol drove the van and Connie organized the meals and navigated. I helped deliver the meals.

I encountered so many different types of people. One lonely, elderly woman kept talking and talking, keeping me with her until Connie yelled from the van that we had to get going. One man would not come out from his bedroom, but called for me to leave the food on the table.

Another client lived in a rather nice, spacious apartment in a large building, while the next man on the route resided in a dilapidated, old building. This particular man's situation greatly affected me because his building's elevator was stuck on the 3rd floor and he lived on the 4th floor and was using crutches. This man was truly homebound—he had no way of getting down without assistance. In this instance, Meals on Wheels not only provided nutrition but also provided a watchful eye, looking after him once a day and monitoring his situation.

Both Connie and Carol know many people's names, addresses, special needs and routines. Connie impressed me because she knew that one woman would probably not answer her door because she tends to fall asleep with her bedroom door closed. Connie knocked loudly on the door, but when she didn't answer, left the meal with a neighbor who knows her.

Connie also knows one of the men on her route has problems with his hands and cannot open the food containers, so she does it for him. He was not home when we delivered his meal, but Connie unpacked it and put it on a plate. When I opened the refrigerator to place the meal inside, I was shocked to discover the meager amount of food that was in it. I had not expected it to be packed with food, but I am not used to seeing a fridge so near empty. Again, it dawned on me how lifesaving Meals on Wheels is to so many people.

After finishing the delivery route, Connie, Carol and I returned to St. Vincent's kitchen with a van full of empty trays from the previous day's meals. Then we ate the same meal that we had delivered to the clients and when I tasted the fried chicken, lasagna, and salad, I was pleasantly surprised. St. Vincent's manages to cook and assemble over 2,000 meals per day and they actually taste good.

After eating, I walked out into the hallway and looked at the greeting cards that were pinned to the wall. Most of them began with "Thank you for the wonderful..." and then went on to mention St. Vincent's attention to details. They thanked St. Vincent's for the food, but were particularly grateful for being remembered on their birthdays, Christmas, Fourth of July, New Years, and various other special days. On their birthdays, the clients receive a piece of cake with a candle in it, a birthday card and a gift. Each holiday is acknowledged with a special food or decoration or a small gift. This is what impresses me the most about St. Vincent's Meals on Wheels—the endless attention to detail.

Before spending the day at St. Vincent's, I knew the statistics—I knew that many of the clientele were people from other Meals on Wheels programs' waiting lists—that is one reason why St. Barnabas contracts with St. Vincent's: to assure that no one is ever turned away. I knew that St. Vincent's delivers seven days a week; and that they prepare special meals for people based not only on dietary needs but also on personal likes and dislikes: if you hate beets, the cook has notes about that and you never get beets.

After working at St. Vincent's, I knew much more about the individuals that are affected by the care and consideration of St. Barnabas Senior Center and St. Vincent's Meals on Wheels. I knew how much these homebound, ill people appreciate not only the food, but also the special attention that the workers at St. Barnabas Senior Center and St. Vincent's Meals on Wheels have put into their programs. The nutrition is critical, but the respect, grace and compassion with which the food is prepared and presented to the recipients elevate this simple act of nourishment and elevate all the people involved.