

# 50 Years of Meals on Wheels of Wake County

## 1972

In February of 1972, the Urban Affairs Division of North Carolina State University called together a meeting of local church, civic, and professional groups to assess the need for a local home-delivered meal service in Wake County. With little to no funds, facilities, or similar programs, coupled with a lack of federal funding, the ambitious group had their hands full to get a program up and running.

## 1973

Wake Memorial Hospital agreed to supply 250 meals a week at \$1.50 per meal. Hillyer Memorial Christian Church became an office space and pick-up point for drivers while the Wake County Chapter of the American Red Cross offered to transport the meals from the hospital to Hillyer. Churches in the area also began to sponsor their efforts and provided volunteer drivers to make up five teams of drivers per day. In October, the name "Meals on Wheels of Wake County" was decided upon.

## 1974

Operations in the Hillyer offices began and on February 12th, the first meal was delivered by Juliette Singleton, who went on to become a volunteer for 40 years. Money and volunteers were often hard to come by in the beginning years. However, continued fundraising, dedicated personnel, and a growing need for meals to the elderly and disabled kept the program growing.



**Juliette Singleton delivering the first meal to Mrs. Ellen Dortch Shore**

## 1980's

In 1985, the first satellite site was opened at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Cary, which still operates today. North Raleigh was the next site to open at North Raleigh United Methodist in 1987. These satellite points allowed Meals on Wheels to expand its services across the areas experiencing the most growth in Wake County.

## 1990's

There was an urgent need to expand the facility as well as the capacity of the program due to growing demand. Meals on Wheels formed a collaboration with the InterFaith Food Shuttle and called it Food Runners, Inc. This partnership would allow for a shared kitchen and office space that increased accessibility for both organizations while they fulfill their respective missions.



**1 millionth meal delivery by longtime volunteer James Allen**

## 2000's

In the fall of 2001, Meals on Wheels began the frozen meal program to better serve those who live in the outlying areas of the county where there are no pickup sites or volunteers available.



**The 2004 opening and dedication of the Vernon Malone Center**

In November of 2004, the Vernon Malone Center was dedicated and Meals on Wheels of Wake County left the church at Hillyer for their present location.

## 2020

Adapting how to serve elderly clients in the face of a national health crisis was the greatest challenge to Meals on Wheels yet. The staff transitioned from a daily hot meal delivery program to a once-a-week delivery of seven frozen meals, masks, and hand sanitizer. Volunteers became even more than delivery drivers; they became lifelines to clients, providing not just meals but also a sense of connection and belonging during a time of profound isolation. Even the pandemic could not slow the organization down as they saw 302 new clients added and a 10% increase in meals served at the height of the crisis.



**Frozen meals being picked up for delivery in the midst of COVID-19**

## 2021

On November 1, all clients received a delivered, hot meal for the first time since the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, all congregated dining spaces, now known as Friendship Cafes, were re-opened to provide lunch, a take-home meal, and a safe space for socialization. Friendship Cafes all over the county were a priority during this time.

## 2024 and Beyond

Meals on Wheels of Wake County now has 11 home delivered sites and 11 Friendship Cafes to serve seniors. 11 million meals have been delivered since 1974, but the work is not done. 8 out of 10 low-income, food-insecure seniors are not receiving the home-delivered or congregated meals they need nationwide. By 2060, 1 in 3 Americans are projected to be 60 and older. With the help of our communities of support, Meals on Wheels will continue to nourish both bodies and spirits, ensuring that every senior receives the nourishment, compassion, and dignity they deserve for the years to come.

**We would like to recognize the following special gifts given in tribute from 10-16-23 to 2-23-24**

**IN HONOR OF**

- Aunt Amber and Uncle Roby*
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- Our Parents*
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- Penny and Fulton Breen*
- Ravenwood HOA*
- Ray Forrest and Brenda Buffaloe*
- Rose Auman and Susan Tillotson*
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- Sue C. Robertson*
- Thanksgiving Meals*
- Trish Villareal*
- Uncle Bob and Aunt Linda*
- Mayumi Yashima*
- Pam Gerace • Rae Brown*
- Sharon Lowther*



**Rachel Findley,  
Meals on Wheels  
of Wake County  
Board President**

## **A Message of Gratitude from the Board President**

*Rachel Findley*

In February 1974, our first meal, prepared by WakeMed Hospital, was delivered to a homebound senior in Wake County. I can only hope that the song, "The Way We Were" by Barbra Streisand was playing on the car speakers as that first meal was in route and Wake County would never be without this integral service again. As we celebrate 50 years of service to our Wake County community, I find myself reflecting on the incredible journey we've traveled thus far. I want to extend my appreciation to each and every one of the volunteers, committed staff members, generous donors, and enthusiastic supporters that contributed to the success and vitality of our organization for the past 50 years. Their tireless efforts ensured that we would celebrate this golden anniversary in service to our community.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to our clients who have served as my adopted grandparents throughout my life. I lost all of my grandparents by the age of six, so I never grew up experiencing the love of a grandparent. I began volunteering with Meals on Wheels of Wake County in 2002 and have met so many amazing seniors during this time that have shared their wisdom and love of life with me. I appreciate the care they have shown me over the years as well as the tears and laughter we have shared. Delivering meals has always been and will continue to be the highlight of my week.

Amidst my gratitude, let us also acknowledge the reality of the clients we serve. Nationally, 1 in 2 seniors living alone lacks the income to pay for basic needs, and almost 10 million seniors are threatened by or experience hunger highlighting the critical importance of our organization's services. Even though hunger may only be a day away for many, our seniors affirm that our services not only improve their health but also instill a sense of security in their homes and empower them to maintain their independence. Our services serve as a crucial lifeline, bridging the gap between senior's basic needs and their ability to live with dignity. Thank you for the support that sustains our mission and allows us to address the evolving needs of seniors in our community, together.

## **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Deliveries**

The week of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was made even brighter by meal deliveries from special guests! For seniors, having a local celebrity deliver their Meals on Wheels meal is a special and memorable experience. It shows that our community members are actively involved and invested in their well-being, and serves as a reminder to the broader community about the importance of supporting programs like Meals on Wheels. A special thank you to Stormy from the Carolina Hurricanes, Ashley Rowe from WRAL, Heather Burkhardt from AARP, and Congresswoman Deborah Ross.





# A “Thank You” is Good Enough

By Meals on Wheels of America



Vernon Shelton is a native son of Dunn, North Carolina, the largest city in Harnett County, 40 minutes due south of Raleigh, North Carolina. He was welcomed into the world in New York before his family relocated to “The Tar Heel State,” and he’ll be the first to tell you he’s not Carolina-born; he’s Carolina-bred, with all the trimmings of southern charm and an intrinsic desire to serve others. It’s clear from spending only a few minutes with Vernon he has a generous spirit, matched only by his long record of service (one he’s reluctant to boast about), his fierce advocacy of the Meals on Wheels mission and his sharp wit. For 45 years – the better part of Vernon’s lifetime – he’s volunteered with Meals on Wheels of Wake County as a delivery person. In that time, he married (now 40 years and counting) and raised a son who’s an award-winning North Carolina news anchor.

What began as a desire to give back to the community is now an integral commitment to the tempo of his life and food for his soul. At 25, while working at a local drugstore in Dunn, Vernon learned about an organization delivering meals to seniors in the community. His boss and pharmacist, the late Dr. Wembley, volunteered with the agency. It was an easy decision for Vernon to get involved. “When I heard about it, my heart was heavy. I decided, ‘You’ve got to do it.’ It’s as simple as that.” Vernon’s impulse to jump in – day after day – speaks to his character and the impact Meals on Wheels has on volunteers. For individuals like Vernon, it’s something you feel as much as you do; it’s who he is and has always been: someone deeply concerned about the well-being of others. “I have a knack for people,” Vernon says. “I love people. When asked what motivates him after all these years, not surprisingly, it’s the people he’s met along the way. It’s also part of what maintains his own vitality – finding time in his week to make a difference in someone’s life just by saying hello. “The people keep me coming back,” Vernon says. “It gives me my energy to see them doing all right. It’s like getting up and putting your shoes on; you have that urge to come on back. When I go to see my people, I’m ecstatic. They make me young because they have so many things to tell you.” Vernon also is incredibly attuned to how vital it is to get others involved in this work. In his own words, no one can do it alone – neither the clients served nor the individuals who show up each day to serve them. “Meals on Wheels, it’s a need,” Vernon says. “We gotta have it. It’ll fall if other people don’t get involved, like everything else.”

His deep belief in what the organization stands for is what inspired him to become an official Meals on Wheels driver during the pandemic, getting up at 4 a.m. and arriving at 6 a.m. at the Meals on Wheels Wake County distribution center to ensure meals made it to those who needed them most during an uncertain time. To him, there’s nothing more important than being a blessing to others. And Vernon’s advice to anyone who wants to get involved (and stay involved) as a Meals on Wheels volunteer is to follow your heart. “You gotta do it from your heart. Everything is done from your heart. You gotta do it because you like to help people in any way you can. If you do it for the money, forget it. If you do it for the praise, forget it. I don’t like praise. A thank you is good enough.” “Every day you gotta get up, [even] when it’s cold or when you feel tired or sick – and strive to do it.”

## IN MEMORY OF

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