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Students serve sustenance and smiles at Phoebe Berks

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Apr 20, 2020



Rachel Kesselring, 18, a senior at Conrad Weiser High School, brightens the day for shut-ins at Phoebe Berks in Wernersville with messages on meals she delivers.

Six days a week for the last month, 18-year-old Rachel Kesselring puts on gloves and a mask and delivers meals to residents sequestered in their rooms and apartments at Phoebe Berks retirement community in Wernersville.

A senior at Conrad Weiser High School who plans a career in medicine, Kesselring is keenly aware that nursing and retirement homes are COVID-19 hot spots.

While she understands there's a risk, Kesselring is dedicated to seeing that Phoebe residents get what they need amid an unprecedented crisis.

"It's a tough time for everybody," she said. "And knowing that I'm helping others makes me feel good."

Kesselring is among a small army of students from Conrad Weiser and Wilson high schools who deliver breakfast, lunch and dinner to Phoebe residents. Lifelines of a sort to elderly shut-ins, they distribute more than 900 meals a day.

Mark Olszewski of Cura Hospitality, a Washington County food service company, manages dining services at Phoebe.

"They're more than important, they're critical to our operation," he said. "Without them, we could not deliver the high quality service Phoebe residents are accustomed to."

Eggs a la cellphone

Beginning around 6 a.m., executive chef Eric Shocket and sous chef Nate Phillips begin preparing for about 225 phone-in meal orders for breakfast.

Residents who used to dine in Phoebe's dining room or cafe now call in made-to-order selections from breakfast and lunch menus. Home-style dinner features a choice of two entrees, including lemon pepper catfish and St. Louis barbecue ribs.

Such is the demand; some of the adult members of Cura's team of 75 dining workers are putting in 12- to 13-hour days since the COVID-19 crisis began.

Serving sustenance and smiles

Some 19 students from Conrad Weiser and Wilson, working as servers and dietary aides, comprise the conduit between the kitchen and the residents.

Wearing gloves and masks, students like 18-year-old Alyssa Dzurkovich of Wernersville drop off meals at each room or apartment. A gentle knock or ring of a doorbell alerts residents that the meal has arrived.

A senior, Dzurkovich had worked after school at Phoebe for more than two years before the coronavirus pandemic struck.

Now, with school closed and Phoebe's residents quarantined, she puts in 6- to 9-hour shifts five days a week.

Dzurkovich, who was 1 month old when terrorists attacked America on Sept. 11, 2001, approaches the biggest national crisis of her young life with a sense of optimism.

It's a little difficult, she confided, to wrap her head around the enormity of it all.

Whatever happens nationally lies pretty much out of her control, but Dzurkovich takes solace in beaming a little sunshine into the lives of the Phoebe residents she serves.

On Thursdays, she and other student aides do grocery shopping for residents at a nearby Redner's supermarket.

Spanning a gap of two or more generations, Dzurkovich jots little messages of hope on the meal containers. And residents write thank you notes in return.

“They’re really appreciative of what we’re doing,” Dzurkovich said. “Seeing their positive faces makes me feel good.”

Dzurkovich insists she’s college-bound come fall. She’s not sure of her field of study.

But having touched the lives of so many who need so much help during a crisis of unprecedented proportions, she confided, “I’m leaning toward some type of social work.”

We'll get through it

Susanne Naylor’s on the phone when her doorbell rings on a recent afternoon.

It’s Rachel Kesselring delivering dinner. Soup, a baked potato, salad and carrots. Naylor often eats light.

“Oh, Rachel, it’s so nice to see you,” said Naylor, 90, a retired West Lawn homemaker who’s lived at Phoebe Berks for 10 years.

They exchange pleasantries and Rachel continues her deliveries.

Naylor, who lives alone, looks forward to the brief encounters with Rachel or other students who deliver meals to her apartment. Some days, they’re among the few in-person conversations she’ll have.

“They’re so courteous, I think very highly of them,” she said. “They’re such fine young people.”

Naylor, whose late husband, Robert, was an executive at Polymer Corp. in Reading, keeps active with phone calls to her sons in California and Connecticut.

She walks the halls and strolls outdoors on Phoebe's campus for exercise. Then, there's the challenge of figuring out how to operate a new laptop.

But those in-person contacts with the students, she said, make all the difference in the world in combating boredom imposed by the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first crisis in Naylor's long life.

She was born in 1929, the year the stock market crash triggered the Great Depression. Then there was World War II. She was just a teenager, but remembers a brother rushing to join the armed services following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

One thing she's learned over nine decades, Naylor said, is that there's always a silver lining no matter how dark the clouds.

"We're going to beat this," she said of the pandemic. "Americans are a strong breed, and we'll sort it out."

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