

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## COMFORT FOOD : Food From The Heart dishes up home deliveries for those unable to cook on their own

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As Thanksgiving approaches and Americans count their blessings, volunteers turn out in droves to serve meals to those less fortunate than them. But when Food From The Heart volunteers deliver their traditional Thanksgiving feast today -- including roast turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, a sage and onion bread stuffing casserole, and a 9-inch pumpkin pie, among other items -- it'll be part of their regular, weekly routine.

For 14 years, the nonprofit organization has made free, year-round deliveries of hot, nutritious meals to local residents who don't qualify for other assistance programs yet whose need is just as great.

While Meals on Wheels and the Community Action

Commission of Santa Barbara County's Mobile Meals primarily help the community's elderly population, Food From The Heart helps younger folks who are unable to prepare food for themselves, due to debilitating illnesses, injuries and disabilities.

They're the young woman with Alzheimer's disease and the clients whose AIDS-related illnesses keep them close to home. The disabled woman who is also legally blind and the middle-aged parents who both have terminal cancer.

"A lot of times we're just a bridge until people get well or their family comes to town and they're able to get some other help," said Food From The Heart founder Evelyn Jacob. "And other people stay in our program for years. It just depends on their need."



Clients are referred by community organizations, such as Hospice of Santa Barbara, Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care and the parish nursing program at Cottage Hospital.

The nonprofit, which is funded primarily by donations, also serves some seniors who need to eat while waiting to qualify for other programs. And once a week, they relieve the staff at Sarah House, a residential care facility for those in hospice or living with AIDS, by providing their clients' meals for the day.

In the early '90s, Ms. Jacob, 58, started bringing food to an HIV-positive friend in Santa Barbara who wasn't strong enough to shop and cook for himself and yet didn't have the financial means to buy prepared meals.

“I realized, ‘Boy there must be other people who could use this,’ “ she said. “I had just sold my business, which was the New York Bagel Factory, and I wanted to do something that would give back to the community,” she said. “It was just me doing service. The business I knew best was food.”

She told AIDS Project Central Coast about her idea and received a list of 25 of their clients. And thus began the program, then called Project Food Chain.

In the early days, the Santa Barbara resident cooked meals in her home kitchen with help from a couple of friends. (“Those two people are still with me helping 15 years later,” Ms. Jacob noted.)

Later, as the program grew and expanded to include other types of clients, they moved into larger facilities. They cooked in the kitchen at St. Anthony’s Seminary for about four years, then at First Presbyterian Church for nine years.

Currently, they operate out of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church on North La Cumbre Road near Foothill Road, cooking meals for about 92 people each week. Some of the parishioners are volunteers in the program and a few have become clients. The group also prepares food for the church’s senior luncheon once a month.

“So it’s a great exchange,” Ms. Jacob said. “They’re happy with us and we’re really happy with them.”

Last week, on Wednesday, the group’s cooking day, chef Sarah Teton was in the kitchen, whipping up the last of a 75-pound batch of mashed potatoes. “Next week we’ll make at least 100 pounds for Thanksgiving,” she said with a smile while forcing a giant masher through a bin full of the thick, fluffy stuff. “Everybody loves potatoes.”

Ms. Teton, 26, is one of Food From The Heart’s few paid part-time staff members. (Other staffers include the program director and a dishwasher.) The Santa Barbara native started out as a volunteer and later brought on her boyfriend, John Gibilaro, 29, while the two were students in Santa Barbara City College’s culinary program.

“I just thought it was such a good cause,” she said. “Food is the way to anyone’s heart. There are just great people here and all the clients are really nice.”

She and Mr. Gibilaro do most of the cooking, overseen by Robin Monroe, a professional chef, who took over as program director in 1999. Ms. Monroe typically is an active presence in the kitchen, but was out this day while having knee replacement surgery.

Ms. Monroe meets with volunteers on Tuesdays to plan out the meal, based on food available at the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County (produce is free, but they pay reduced costs for canned or packaged foods), which is supplemented by the farmers market and other stores.



They shop and do all the prep work -- mostly chopping -- on Tuesdays, followed by cooking and home deliveries on Wednesdays. Some 50 volunteers are on the group’s call list.

Over in the main hall, the aromas of pot roast and gravy lingered in the air -- enough to make stomachs growl -- while a crew of volunteers was busy dishing out portions of food into plastic containers lining a long table.

On the menu this day: Carrot Coconut Soup, Tortilla Bean Pie, Beef Pot Roast and Mashed Potatoes, Three Bean Salad and Cranberry Upside Down Cake.

Each client receives a large bag containing each dish, packaged in clear containers. They also receive two or three loaves of bread, which is donated weekly by Our Daily Bread; fresh fruit; and milk and/or juice, depending on what’s available.



Though only two main entrées are included, the generous helpings and side dishes, including a hearty soup and salad, are enough to last some clients through the week. All they need to do is refrigerate or freeze them and re-heat them later.

The focus is on healthy, nutritionally balanced meals. “We try to add a lot of antioxidants to the food,” said Ms. Jacob. “We don’t do any deep-frying. We use only pure olive oils, just the best ingredients we can find.” Organic produce is used whenever possible.

“Every dish is garnished so people see the food and it makes them want to eat,” she added. “Most of them have diminished appetites (due to illness) ... You want it to be visually appealing so they’ll want to eat.” In the ‘90s, she authored two cookbooks on balanced cooking based on a health program developed by Dr. Diana Schwarzbein, a local .

Cliff Marcinkiewicz, 50, is one their clients. Because of carpal tunnel syndrome, he has difficulty preparing his own meals. He also is HIV-positive and is unable to work because of fatigue. The food deliveries ease his financial burden, since he’s living on a limited income.

“Sometimes I get two meals out of one because they’re decent sizes and proportions,” said the Santa Barbara resident, who’s been a client for about a dozen years. “I pretty much live off of the food that I get from them for a week.”

Though the dishes are always changing, one of his favorites is Tortilla Bean Pie: “It’s got beans and cheese and tortillas, and it’s soooo good. When I get it, I really look forward to it,” he said.

He praises the soups, salads and desserts. “I know they

work really hard on providing this, because it shows in the taste and everything,” he said.

But he also enjoys the interaction with the volunteers who deliver the food. “I look forward to the ‘Hi, how are you?’ and ‘Have a good week,’ “ said Mr. Marcinkiewicz.

The group tries to keep volunteers on the same delivery routes, which range from Goleta to Carpinteria, so they’ll bond with the clients. The idea, said Ms. Jacob, is to recreate the feeling of a small-town community taking care of neighbors and friends in need.

“The personal part of it is good and the food part of it is good, too,” said Mr. Marcinkiewicz. “I look forward to Wednesdays very much.”

Volunteers never know when the program might be something they need themselves. One volunteer, Cody Cambell, found herself on the receiving end of Food From The Heart when she had an incapacitating eye injury last December.

“I had a detached retina and I had to be face down for 45 minutes out of every hour,” said the Santa Barbara resident. “Every 15 minutes every hour didn’t give me a lot of

opportunity to cook or shop or do any of that.”

Though she was relying on friends to get her through, out of the blue, the nonprofit sent her a package one Wednesday and continued to help her out on the long road to recovery. “They said, ‘We thought you could use it,’ “ she recalled. “And I was like, ‘Boy and how!’ “

“It never occurred to me that I could ask them to send it,” she said. “It was just a godsend having that package come.”



## YOU CAN HELP

Food From The Heart always needs donations to fund its free weekly meal service for the ill, injured and homebound. “Every penny that comes in goes toward food and packaging,” said founder Evelyn Jacob. “Even a small donation of \$25 helps us buy enough cheese for a week’s worth of meals.”

You can make a tax-deductible donation on the non-profit’s secure Web site at [www.foodfromtheheart.com](http://www.foodfromtheheart.com) or send checks to Food From The Heart, P.O. Box 3908, Santa Barbara 93130.



The group also seeks volunteers. Drivers to make deliveries are especially needed. For more information, call 898-3981 or e-mail [info@foodfromtheheart.us](mailto:info@foodfromtheheart.us).

## HEARTFUL VOLUNTEERS

Food From The Heart’s 50 or so volunteers are a special bunch. They’re divided into separate food preparation and delivery crews, ranging from a high school student who makes deliveries on his lunch hour to an 89-year-

old woman who’s been volunteering in the kitchen for years.

“She’s our head onion chopper,” said founder Evelyn Jacob. “She’s 89 but she doesn’t miss a week.”

Kitchen volunteers benefit, too, from developing cooking techniques, menu ideas and other culinary skills.

“We learned so much,” said Heidi Schulz, 63, a Santa Barbara resident and longtime volunteer. “My cooking skills were just dramatically improved. They went through the roof.”

There’s “a great camaraderie between the volunteers,” added Ms. Jacob. “We call ourselves family - and it truly is a family. Older people and young people and quirky people -we all work side by side together.”

Lifelong friendships have formed over chopping, dicing and packaging meals. The food crew often has lively discussions while they work, and they share a “family lunch” when their work is done.

The volunteers “bring just a wonderful body of experience and individuality to the food and to the people and to each other,” said Ms. Schulz. “I think that’s the reason it’s such a long-lived, cohesive group.”

Over the years, chefs and caterers from around town have volunteered time in the kitchen. Even the late Julia Child, a personal friend of Ms. Jacob and Montecito resident, occasionally stopped by to help. “She would just chop vegetables and tell stories and be her engaging self,” said Ms. Schulz. “She had the most eclectic personality. She was at least as engaging and funny and generous in person as she was on TV.”

“She was into feeding people,” said Ms. Jacob, with a wistful look in her eye. “We miss her.”