

Impact: Profiles in Community Service Meals on Wheels Plus

Editor's Note: This is part of a continuing series of profiles on the not-for-profit organizations that have a significant impact on the quality of life in our community.



Darrell Turner, May Ann Turner and Ellen Campbell at the 2008 Tropical Nights fundraiser. LOE staff photo

What's in a name? When the name is Meals on Wheels Plus, the answer is plenty. This active Manatee County organization, started in Bradenton in 1972, prepares and delivers thousands of meals daily to people all over the county. But it also provides a whole lot more than meal service.

One of the major "plusses" to Meals on Wheels Plus is the food bank (the only one in the county) that the group runs. The Food Bank of Manatee collects and distributes more than 1 million pounds of food a year to over 70 local service agencies.

If that were not enough to keep the 75 employees and hundreds of volunteers busy, the Bradenton-based organization also developed, owns and runs the fantastic new Renaissance on 9th community center. The Renaissance on 9th, an extensively rebuilt former Winn-Dixie store across the street from McKechnie Field, the spring training home of the Pittsburgh Pirates, is a beautiful facility that encompasses a senior Enrichment Center, Turner Ballroom, Weinberg Health Clinic, and the 9th Street Bistro and meeting rooms. The new facility, part of the renaissance of downtown Bradenton, is already proving to be a popular venue for other not-for-profits groups for their events. It boasts a growing membership that is already approaching 500.

Still more "plusses" for Meals on Wheels Plus include a large transportation operation for seniors, a friendship dining program and an active adult day care. Other community support programs include support services for caregivers, telephone reassurance for those who live alone, coordinating the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) which places seniors over 55 in volunteer positions in community not-for-profit organizations and nutrition counseling.

A member of Meals on Wheels Association of America, the local group is governed by an active board of directors with 18 members from all over the county. Darrell Turner of Turner Tree and Landscaping is the current board president. The Turner family

is a major booster and contributor to the organization and holds the annual Tropical Night fundraiser at their home each spring. Leading the staff and volunteers is executive director Ellen Campbell who came on board in 1989. Supplementing the 75 staff members are a cadre of approximately 2,000 volunteers who help staff all of the group's programs. Desperately needed currently are many more volunteer drivers who pick up and deliver meals to homebound seniors from the islands to out east between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm.

The organization raises necessary operating funds through grant writing, events including the Tropical Nights evening that is attended by several hundred people and raises about ten percent of its total budget by charging fees for its services for those who can afford to pay.

Meals on Wheels Plus also has a speakers bureau which can supply knowledgeable speakers for clubs and organizations. Topics include MOW Plus programs, volunteering opportunities and community partnerships.

According to Ellen Campbell, Meals on Wheels Plus future plans include "becoming much more visible in east county where there is a growing need for adult day care and transportation and to continue to offer services to those who can't afford it. "To do this, we need more volunteers and more support dollars," Campbell said. "Our expenses have risen sharply with the costs of food and gasoline and more and more people are utilizing out services in this time of economic need because they are no longer able to take care of themselves."

Meals on Wheels Plus is located at 811 23rd Avenue East in Bradenton. The phone is (941) 747-4655 and e-mail is info@mealsonwheelsplus.org. The website is www.mealsonwheelsplus.org.

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