

Wayland's very own 'angels'

By Susan L. Sherwood/ Staff Writer

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Several years ago, when Wayland's Jean Seiden was being treated for breast cancer, her friends and neighbors set up a meal chain and delivered food to her home on a regular basis.

Not long after that, another town resident, Pam Washek, was found to have a tumor in her shoulder, and Seiden offered to set up a similar meal chain for her family.

"I said that would be great," Washek recalls. "And, as a result, we had a hot dinner delivered three times a week for six months. Both Jean and I felt that we were seriously blessed to have had such support."

A few months later, Washek was driving around in her car and reflecting on the experience.

"I thought about all the people who had helped me when I really needed it. And I thought to myself 'those people were like angels.' Right there, from my car, I called Jean and asked her whether she'd be willing to join me in doing something like this on a regular, organized basis."

Seiden agreed, and thus was born what was initially called "The Wayland Angel Food Network." From the two original founders, the group has grown to some 190 volunteers, who, to date, have delivered more than 500 meals to at least 20 families in town. At any given time, they're probably helping out three to five families.

"Initially, it was just food," Washek says. "But it has evolved into more. We drive people to medical appointments or to the grocery store. One of our volunteers served as a homework helper for the kids because the mother was busy taking care of her ailing husband and working outside the home as well. We provide a daily check-in for other people who need it. Someone even went and, as a gift, put in a garden for one of the recipients, with the plants donated by local nurseries."

In view of this expansion of services, the group now calls itself the "Wayland Angels Network." And it's not just for cancer victims, Washek says.

"We try to help anyone who's going through a crisis of some sort. It can be a physical crisis, or a mental/emotional one," she says.

"We've had people with ALS, people who have had back surgery, people with broken bones. The bottom line is that when something is disrupted in the household, tasks as routine as getting dinner on the table or running errands can be overwhelming. So we do those sorts of things, and this allows the families to focus on their crisis; it helps them to keep going."

So far, Washek says, no one has tried to take advantage of the Angels. Quite to the contrary, some recipients of their help have actually turned around and become Angels themselves.

One such person is Ann Marie Gentilucci of Wayland, who received help from the Angels when her family was going through a particularly tough time. Her father had just died, and her sister was in Chicago dying of ovarian cancer.

"What the Angels did," Gentilucci says, "was to drop a meal by every couple of days for several weeks during this terrible period. After we got through it, I decided to turn around and join them because it occurred to me that this was exactly what my sister so desperately needed in Chicago, but didn't have.

"It was just wonderful to have these people who would come to the back door with food and condolences. With all that was going on at the time, to come home and have a meal ready for my family was such a gift."

Others have sent notes expressing their profound gratitude.

"Hello, Angels," said one. "You were such a help to us in providing so many tasty meals that I would never have had the energy to pull off after spending the day either at the hospital or driving my husband to the many doctor/hospital appointments he had ... Words don't seem sufficient, but all that you provided - from encouragement, smiles, and, of course, the delicious meals - will never be forgotten."

Another, who broke her wrist and lives alone, wrote, "This is a huge 'thank you' to all ... who helped me when I could do very little for myself. I feel the deepest appreciation for all your support, loving care and kindness. You nurtured my body and soul and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Photo Gallery



Wayland Angels Network member Maureen DeJong prepares carrot cake at her home on Rice Spring Lane. (Staff photo by Ed Hopfmann)

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As for the volunteers, they have signed on for a variety of reasons. One, Maureen DeJong, also of Wayland, who joined the Angels last fall and has delivered meals, run errands and done some driving to medical appointments in Boston, said she decided to get involved "because I feel that it's very important for people to give back to the community. I'm a stay-at-home mom, but at the same time, I'm back in school earning my bachelor's degree in English at Framingham State. And the Angels provide me with an opportunity to volunteer when I can.

"What's wonderful about this group is that there are so many people involved now that, if a request comes at a bad time, you can decline knowing that someone else will fill the need and that there will be other opportunities."

Volunteer Kathy Wrean of Wayland, who has delivered meals, driven people to appointments, and substituted for a teacher friend who was undergoing chemotherapy last year, agrees, "Everybody takes their particular skills and fills in where they're needed."

Wrean, who has known both Seiden and Washek for years, calls them "true-life heroes. They took their adversity and turned it into a positive thing for so many families in town."

DeJong adds, "Both of these women have walked the fine line between being caring and sensitive and being incredibly efficient. That's a hard balance to achieve. In so doing, they have created what I think of as an extended family here in Wayland."

Amidst all these accolades, Washek simply says, "It's a good feeling to know that we're helping people in need. You get a greater sense of a nice close-knit community when something like this is going so well. It says something about the community's willingness to help, and it's wonderful."

Anyone interested in being on either the giving or receiving end of the Wayland Angels Network should call Washek at 508-545-1052 or e-mail her at "wafn@comcast.net"

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