

12/10/2004

Cafe serves up lunch with side of sociality

By LISA BACKUS , Middletown Press Correspondent

MIDDLETOWN -- As volunteer Henry Pianka carefully doles out bread and coffee cups at the Middletown Senior Center, about a dozen senior citizens are engaging in casual banter as they eagerly await the start of their weekday ritual.

Monday through Friday, Pianka, 79, helps serve his buddies lunch as part of the Community Renewal Team's Senior Community Café program. On any given day, Pianka will show up at the center in plenty of time to portion out bread, butter and other lunch-time essentials while other seniors take their "assigned" seats and spend time chatting while the meal is served.

"They need the help and I do it," said Pianka, who has been volunteering for the program for six-and-a-half years. "I enjoy the people, so I come out when I can and I do anything that's needed. I'm here almost every day."

The senior lunches are prepared in a kitchen off-site by CRT staff and delivered to the center every morning. Grace Larry, the Middletown Senior Café manager, oversees the center's program and lets Pianka know what needs dishing up. Other senior volunteers help set tables and clean up afterward.

CRT spokesperson Liz Dupont-Diehl said the program is as much about giving seniors a chance to socialize as it is about seeing to their nutritional needs. Between CRT's two kitchens in Middletown and Hartford, CRT produces 5,800 lunches that go senior centers and elderly complexes, Head Start, and other youth programs, and other social services five days a week.

"Napoleon has nothing on us," Dupont-Diehl points out with a laugh. "It's a logistical marvel. I sometimes think invading armies have nothing on our Senior Café program."

CRT is the state's largest Community Action Agency, providing a wide array of social services from senior lunches and Meals on Wheels to Head Start for preschoolers to warm coats for low-income families and individuals.

During the week, the nonprofit agency produces meals for dozens of Senior Cafés held at senior centers in Hartford and Middlesex counties. Each cafe has a manager and volunteers who serve up lunch for anywhere from a dozen to 30 or more seniors.

The meals are prepared with funding from the federal government through the Older Americans Act. Seniors are asked to make a \$2 donation when they eat at a Senior Café and to call their senior center to make a reservation for a meal a day in advance. Anyone 62 or older and their spouse can partake in the meals, regardless of income level.

"This allows people to remain independent longer," Dupont-Diehl explained. "Sometimes shopping and cooking can be a burden and it gets people out. We've had Café managers say that the reason some people are motivated to get up in the morning is because they are headed to the senior center to have lunch."

On one stormy morning, about a dozen seniors - which is half the normal crowd - show up close to an hour in advance of 11:30 a.m. lunch to greet friends and talk before the meal is served.

"I like the meal and when you get old, you don't really want to make this kind of meal for just one person," said Gladys Martinez, 81, a Café regular. "I come here and I enjoy the food and we talk and have fun. We get to see people every day."

Martinez sits at a table with Sal Russo, another regular who says he arrives early every day so he can talk with friends and his lunch table mates. "It's easier for me to eat here rather than cook," said Russo who has been coming for seven years. "I get here early to talk and we joke around a lot. It beats cooking."

According to Phyllis Pollock, the nutrition director for the Middlesex Services of CRT, the agency serves up between 800 to 1,000 meals a day between various senior centers, senior communities and youth programs, including Head Start in the Middletown area alone. The Hartford kitchen produces 5,000 meals a day.

The meals include coffee, milk, bread, an entrée, vegetables and dessert.

On Dec. 16, CRT will serve a special holiday meal with all the trimmings and a few surprises for the participants. The holiday meal is also a \$2 suggested donation.

Pollock said many of the seniors come every day and have "assigned" seats with their friends. Since the program is sponsored by a nonprofit agency, each senior center has a part-time café manager as the only paid staff. The agency relies on senior volunteers like Pianka to get the meal served every day.

"One of the main intents was to provide for the social needs of seniors, but we also provide for their nutritional needs as well," Pollock said. "We put out monthly menus and we change menus with the seasons. We try to make them as happy as we can."

On this day, 82-year-old Gertrude Sansbury is sitting with Martinez at their usual table with Russo, waiting for macaroni and cheese. On tap later the same week will be sliced roast pork and veal Parmesan with shells. "I think they do a good job. We get nice food and I don't like to cook," Sansbury admitted with a chuckle.

"This is a good thing for seniors. Communication is very important for us and our lady over at the table (referring to Grace), she's great. They do a wonderful job here."

In the Middletown area, CRT sponsored Senior Community Cafés are held at the Cromwell, Durham, East Hampton, East Haddam, Middletown and Portland Senior Centers.

All seniors 62 and older and their spouses are eligible to attend. Seniors are asked to call the senior center where they plan on taking the meal one day in advance.