



WVS Volunteers in the UK during WWII deliver some of the first "Meals on Wheels." Courtesy Photo

Heartstring Tugger

By Alaina Kowitz, Rural Resources

A couple of weeks ago, I visited the home of a Kettle Falls resident who partakes in Rural Resources' Senior Nutrition program. One of the services that Senior Nutrition provides to local senior citizens is meal delivery through our Meals on Wheels membership, and eligible participants can receive three meals a week delivered to their door. In 2024, the Senior Nutrition team delivered 41,000 meals to over 700 clients in the tri-county area. We know the need is growing, and that there are many more seniors out there who could benefit from this program.

The purpose of my visit was to capture a Senior Nutrition participant's story so we could include it in our March fundraising campaign for the program. The participant's name is Shawn and, after navigating his icy driveway, I sat down in his warm house to talk with him. I wasn't sure what to expect from this person whom I had never met, and before I entered his house I had created a mental picture of a frail, elderly man with a soft voice, probably wearing a cardigan, whose story would tug on the heartstrings of potential donors.

When I entered the house, Shawn, sitting in a recliner on the other side of the living room, called me over with a booming voice and a strong laugh. He cracked about five jokes in quick succession before I could fully take off my coat and sit down. It dawned on me that Shawn was almost the exact opposite of the person I had envisioned before I walked in the door – less of a "heartstring tugger" and more of a "chain yanker."

In body, Shawn is as robust as his voice. He has a thick beard, wore work jeans and a plaid shirt, and looked as though he could have just wandered in off the mountain after a long day of woodcutting. The only misplaced detail was the sunglasses that covered Shawn's eyes as he sat in his living room. In 2014, Shawn discovered that he had a genetic disease that caused loss of eyesight. By 2019 he was completely blind.

A longtime Kettle Falls resident, Shawn told me that when he first came to the area in 2002, he knew immediately that he had found his home. He made a living logging, commercial fishing, and working as a prison guard before his eyesight failed. He obviously had a deep love for this area and embodied a spirit of independence and resilience. He was a perfect example of someone who valued a rural, independent lifestyle. Often, though, that desire for autonomy can clash with the increased need for support as a person ages or deals with other physical challenges.

Services like Senior Nutrition's meal delivery can help senior citizens stay in their homes and maintain an independent lifestyle for as long as possible. For people in our rural communities, that ability to maintain their autonomy is priceless. Meeting with Shawn reminded me that receiving support doesn't mean giving up independence – it can actually help preserve it. He also defied the stereotype I had in my head of who "needs" care or support.

Rural areas pose unique challenges for seniors, especially those with limited mobility or disabilities. Unlike cities, where support networks and services are more accessible, many elderly individuals in small communities live miles from the nearest town, often with no neighbors nearby. For some, family members have moved away, leaving them without a built-in support system. This isolation can lead to serious consequences – not only nutritional deficiencies but also declining mental health due to loneliness and lack of social engagement.

This is where programs like Senior Nutrition play a crucial role. Beyond just delivering meals, they provide a critical point of contact for seniors, ensuring that they are not completely cut off from the world. Volunteers and staff members serve as a lifeline, offering not only sustenance but also connection and regular check-ins. In some cases, they may be the only people a senior interacts with all week.

As I left Shawn's house, I reflected on the fact that he was not what I had expected and how far off I had been with my assumptions. Someone may be as tough as nails like Shawn, as resilient as they come, and still benefit from some kind of assistance or service – one doesn't have to be frail or in crisis to get help. I admired the fact that Shawn saw his delivered meals as supportive of his independence rather than negating it.

Our Senior Nutrition program is about more than just food – it's about dignity, about ensuring that no one is forgotten. It's about recognizing that need doesn't always look the way we expect it to. And most importantly, it's about fostering a community that supports each other.

If you would like to donate to support the Senior Nutrition program at Rural Resources, you can give at ruralresources.org/nutrition-donations. Thank you!