



OCCOA

OTSEGO COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING



Submitted by
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RESEARCH &
VOLUNTEER
COORDINATOR

*We Help.
We Care*

120 Grandview Blvd., Gaylord, Michigan 49735

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**OCCOA SPECIAL EVENTS COORDINATOR
MICHELLE DUNKELBERG**

"Food" for the heart!

I come from a big family that has always delighted in gathering for good food, drinks, and lots of time to reconnect, as well as reminisce about the "good ol' days." Every time the holidays roll by, I can't help but think back on all the special meals with my family that have punctuated my life throughout the years. I recall the aroma of our most-recent Thanksgiving turkey that permeated the air and the sound of laughter that filled the rooms of my mother's home as my family all visited with each other, sharing many a joke and story. It can get pretty loud, and it is sometimes crazy. But we love it. We are together, and that's what matters most!

Now I know that sometimes these meals are not always like a fairytale story. Sometime there has been sadness over the loss of a recently-departed family member, such as was the case for the first year of holidays we shared after my father passed away. Sometimes the atmosphere has been strained because "so and so" was upset with "you know who." Despite some of these losses and upsets, those of us who could, would still gather, bringing our bumps and bruises, to be nursed by those who had "been there" once themselves. After all, these family meals served the purpose of doing more than filling our stomachs – they were food for our hearts! These meals were and still are about being together and reconnecting. They are about providing understanding and encouragement, and even giving "life" to each other.

Since I joined the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA) over nine years ago, some of my favorite activities are the special meals that the agency offers to the County's older adults throughout the year. Perhaps these meals are so special to me because they call to mind and heart the "holiday" feel of the many special meals I have shared with my own family. Like those countless cherished family meals I have enjoyed, they similarly provide "food for the hearts" to those who attend.

Meals, in general, are an important OCCOA program offering. The agency is responsible for coordinating the preparation and delivery of home-delivered meals to 110 homebound older adults in Otsego County. In addition, the agency offers several other meal options, including congregate meals in Gaylord, Johannesburg, and Vanderbilt on various days of the week, as well as "a la carte" Red Hen Soup and Sandwich lunches on Tuesdays at the Gaylord Meal Site. It is the special "themed" meals, though, that are my favorites. Judging by the large turnouts, many smiles, laughter, and excitement that fill the OCCOA Meal Site in Gaylord during these special meals, they are a lot of other people's favorites!

In past years, the OCCOA staff focused on making a couple of its congregate meals extra special, such as at Thanksgiving and Christmas time, by providing traditional holiday meals, themed decorations, special entertainment and 50/50 raffles and prize drawings. Seeing what a big hit these luncheons were and knowing how hard the colder weather months were on older adults in Otsego County, a couple of years ago, the agency added quarterly, themed luncheons. This year's series of themed luncheons is known as "Days Gone by Luncheons."

Just as my parents and grandparents were the backbone behind my family's special meals, the OCCOA relies on several key staff to be its backbone in the planning of its special luncheons. OCCOA Special Events Coordinator Michelle Dunkelberg is one of them. She notes that planning for the meals begins months beforehand. There are many details to attend to, but she has a lot of help. "The planning process for our luncheons involves several different agency departments, community sponsors, and volunteers," Dunkelberg explains. Once the themes for the luncheons have been finalized, she works with the agency's meal program coordinator, Suzanne Bannister, to design menus to fit them. Dunkelberg also puts in a lot of time scouting out inexpensive and/or donated decorations to help bring the themes to life.

A lot of assistance is needed to serve the increasing numbers of people attending the luncheons. Luckily, Dunkelberg can turn to the agency's Volunteer Department. Not surprisingly, there is a sizeable pool of volunteers who also enjoy being a part of the special lunches. There are some who enjoy greeting the participants, or helping out at the registration and raffle tables. Many volunteers also help the OCCOA kitchen staff in dishing up and serving the meals, as well as cleaning up afterward. No party would be complete without entertainment, and the agency is blessed with many musicians who are willing to volunteer their time to share the gift of music.

To help advertise the luncheons, Dunkelberg assists in the design and development of the marketing materials, and enlists the help of community sponsors for donations to the prize raffle table. She emphasizes, "The goal of these luncheons is to make sure that everyone who comes has fun!"



SPECIAL EVENTS COORDINATOR MICHELLE DUNKELBERG WITH VOLUNTEERS CHRIS CZAJKOWSKI AND CHERYL MARTINEZ AT THE HARVEST LUNCHEON

In recently chatting with luncheon-regular Barbara Samkowiak, she remarked to me, "I really enjoy the special luncheons! I have been attending all of them for the past five years, and don't believe I've missed one!" She attends them, she explains, because the food and entertainment are good. She laughed, adding, "I also love the 50/50 raffle and the prize drawing – they always have good gifts!"

Samkowiak, who was born in Johannesburg and who has lived in Otsego County most of her life, noted that she knows a lot of people from both Vanderbilt and Johannesburg. "When the OCCOA offers these special luncheons, people come from all over the county. This gives me the chance to see friends and acquaintances that I don't normally get to see!" She also noted that the cold weather months in Northern Michigan seem especially long and boring. "Having these special luncheons to go to really gives me something to look forward to. I always leave feeling good – I have had a good meal, listened to good music, and visited with my friends!" As we concluded our conversation, I smiled to myself. I know that not only has Samkowiak had fun, but that her heart has been "fed" as well!



BARBARA SAMKOWIAK LOOKS FORWARD TO THE OCCOA SPECIAL LUNCHEONS

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE UPCOMING DECEMBER 11th HOLIDAY PARTY OR THE JANUARY 15th DAYS GONE BY LUNCHEON AND OTHER OCCOA SPECIAL EVENTS, PROGRAMS, AND ACTIVITIES, PLEASE VISIT OUR SEE WHAT'S NEW PAGE ON OUR WEBSITE, WWW.OTSEGOCOUNTYCOA.ORG, OR CALL MICHELLE DUNKELBERG AT 748-4068.

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