

THE FIRST ✦ THE ONLY

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At age 7, Lily Lampp is one tough

## Tyke on the Track







A trip to the Vero Beach Museum of Art with son Grant spawns a conversation about seniors dealing with food insecurity.

# Food for Thought

A FATHER-AND-SON OUTING CALLS TO MIND THE ART OF THE CAR WHEN HEALTHY FOOD IS TOO FAR

After spending a recent rainy Sunday morning exhausting all of the “inside games” I could play with my 9-year-old son, Grant, I suggested we take a ride to the Vero Beach Museum of Art to check out the latest exhibit. We pulled on our rain jackets and headed out to view “Rolling Sculpture: Streamlined Art Deco Automobiles and

Motorcycles,” a collection of 20 rare cars and two motorcycles designed in the 1930s.

As he stared in awe at the gleaming black 1938 Phantom Corsair, I told him that the car’s designer was a man named Rust Heinz, grandson of Henry J. Heinz.

“Like the ketchup?” he asked.

“Yes, the same family,” I replied.

I could see his mind working. Sleek and streamlined hood and fenders. Sleek and streamlined glass containers filled with condiments.

“I’m getting kind of hungry, Dad,” Grant said. “Can we go get something to eat?”

With the rain still falling and preventing an outdoor picnic, Grant chose the comfort of a cozy restaurant



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

booth for our late-afternoon meal. As we waited for our food to come, I could tell something was still on Grant's mind.

"Is there anyone in our family who is still alive that was around when those cars were built?"

"Not anymore, buddy," I replied, reminding him that his "Grandpa Marvin," who passed away in 2013, was born in 1938. "But I do have several clients who were alive then, and one or two who probably learned to drive the year those cars came out."

"They still drive?" Grant asked with surprise.

"No, most have someone else do the driving for them," I continued. "But there are a lot more elderly people here in town who live alone, do not drive, and have very little help to get around."

"What happens to them? How do they get to the grocery store?"

"Good question, buddy," I replied. "Sometimes they get help from friends or family, and other times they depend on different charities to help them."

My succinct, not-too-detailed-but-informative answer seemed to satisfy Grant's curiosity. I believe he was comforted by my reassurance that the senior citizens he worried about were able to get help.

However, I also believe he is becoming observant enough to recognize the irony between the opulence of the car collection we just visited and the reality that lack of transportation makes life harder, and often lonelier, for seniors in our community. I did not dwell on the subject with him, confident that I gave him enough information to be truthful. However, I spent the afternoon thinking about the reality.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 85 percent of Indian River County seniors over the age of 65 live more than 1/2 mile from a grocery store selling healthy food, and 56 percent live more than 1 mile away. More than half of this population either lives in poverty or one Social Security payment away from it. Many are in need of medical and social services. I would find these statistics hard to believe had I not witnessed the disparity with my own eyes.

For several years, at the invitation of Senior Resource Association President and CEO Karen Deigl, I have joined other community leaders for the Meals on Wheels "March

for Meals" event. Instead of donning a tuxedo for a gala or playing in a golf tournament, community leaders are paired with the organization's volunteers to ride along on their routes as they make deliveries to seniors. It is an eye-opening experience.

Five days a week, hundreds of low-income seniors, many of whom live alone, receive hot, nutritious meals delivered to their doors by SRA volunteers through the Meals on Wheels program. During my last ride-along experience, the route we were assigned included a mobile home park near the intersection of U.S. Highway 1 and Fourth Street. I had driven past the neighborhood a number of times and never noticed it. I was surprised by what I observed.

To make our first delivery, we parked on the edge of the dirt road in front of the recipient's home. From the trunk we removed the appropriate allocation of meals from the warmer and walked up the mostly rotting steps to knock on the front door of an aging but sturdy mobile home. Our first "customer" was a handsomely dressed woman who greeted us with the news that it was her birthday. She had turned 89 and was waiting on a visit from her pastor. At her direction, I placed the meals on the kitchen counter and noticed



United Against Poverty's Member Share Grocery Program is for Indian River County residents who live at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

how clean and orderly she maintained the inside of her home, compared to the rather distressed exterior. She thanked us, told us how much she appreciated the visit, and waved from the door as we drove to the next road.

Our next two deliveries were to customers whose homes were next door to one another. They were much older and in more disrepair than our first stop. As we climbed another set of rotting steps to knock on a sliding glass door, the neighbor shouted “I don’t think he’s home. Ambulance was here last night.”

With the kitchen in plain view, we tried the door and it slid open. Rather than reschedule the delivery, we planned to leave the meals in the refrigerator but could not make our way through the trash bags and other debris that crowded the floor.

“This is only the third week for this customer,” my fellow volunteer and regular driver said. “However, something must not be right because the home was never this messy.”

As I looked around the main living area, “messy” is not how I would have described it. What I observed was the home of an elderly person living in squalor. Less than 3 miles as the crow flies from some of the most expensive residential real estate in Florida.

Using his iPhone, my

**According to the USDA, 85 percent of Indian River County seniors over the age of 65 live more than 1/2 mile from a grocery store selling healthy food.**



When seniors are no longer able to drive and lack alternate transportation to grocery stores, they rely on family, neighbors, and programs like Meals on Wheels for food.





Treasure Coast Food Bank put the Mobile Mercado on the road in 2020 to provide residents of low-income areas of our community access to healthy food when there's no grocery store nearby.



fellow volunteer marked the delivery to be rescheduled and indicated that a wellness check would be beneficial. In 2018, the Community Foundation awarded SRA a grant of \$38,000 to upgrade the technology that moved this delivery tracking and reporting system from paper to electronic, saving volunteers time and ensuring better monitoring for the program's partici-

pants. Program staff would be instantly notified and could arrange appropriate services for a program participant whose living conditions, and possibly well-being, were in decline. Despite more than 150,000 meals being delivered through Meals on Wheels last year, the program has a long waiting list. Other organizations, such as United Against

Poverty, collaborate with SRA's GoLine to provide low-income seniors who live alone free transportation to shop at its member share grocery at the UP Center.

Another innovative approach to serving seniors who are food-insecure began in 2020 when, with help from a \$100,000 grant from Indian River Community Foundation, Treasure Coast Food Bank put its "Mobile Mercado" on the road. This outfitted "grocery store on wheels" makes stops in 12 low-income areas of our community to distribute healthy food to low-income seniors who do not live near a grocery store or market.

It has been a hundred years since F. Scott Fitzgerald and the roaring twenties introduced the notion of the car as a status symbol. In the decade that followed, at the height of the Great Depression and a nation-

wide hunger epidemic, the designers of the fine automobiles displayed in the "Rolling Sculpture" exhibition perfected it. Almost a century later, we have preserved these relics by giving them a place of honor alongside works of art, some of which were crafted by painters and sculptors who died penniless and likely spent many a day hungry. For many in our community, that hunger remains.

As we wrapped up our lunch, Grant thanked me for the afternoon outing. On the way home, it dawned on me that in another 30 years, when I am 80 years old, it will be his generation invited to participate in March for Meals. Would his generation ignore the need or repeat the tradition of helping hungry seniors?

"Can't repeat the past?" asks Jay Gatsby.

"Why, of course you can." ❁