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TOP STORY

Chef Kevin Barko brings fresh ideas to Meals of Joy

By Laura Latzko, West Valley View Staff Writer

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Meals of Joy executive chef Kevin Barko, left, with founder Larry Cervarich. (Meals of Joy/Submitted)

Meals of Joy, an organization that delivers fresh, healthy meals to seniors in the West Valley, recently hired a new executive chef. Kevin Barko brings 40 years of food service and 20 years of restaurant experience. He started with Meals of Joy at the beginning of June.

Barko said that he and Meals of Joy founder Larry Cervarich have been working together to find ways to grow the program.

Cervarich founded Meals of Joy in 2014. The organization serves seniors 55 and older who cannot afford, or have the capacity or desire to prepare meals daily.

“There’s such a need out there in the community of seniors,” Cervarich said. “Not just because they have medical or financial problems. After a period of time as they age, they just lose interest in preparing meals. They just don’t have that desire. Bringing that fresh meal to their door is giving them that nutrition that they need.”

Barko has experience in different areas of the food industry, including management and marketing for companies such as Sysco Foods, Shamrock Foods, and Vienna Beef. However, giving back at the local level is something that has always been important to him.

“I would volunteer for things,” he said. “I always felt at home with that philosophy. Working with Larry, it was really a perfect match to give back to the community. ... It was a perfect way to bring homemade, quality food to the elderly.”

He also has some experience with daily meal delivery. Through his catering company, he offered prepared meals during the height of COVID-19. As a consultant, he worked with hospitals across the country to implement a “room-service-style” meal system.

Cervarich said that for many seniors, getting a hot meal helps them to be able to stay in their homes and live independently. He often gets calls from clients’ children, who are appreciative that their mothers or fathers receive regular hot meals.

He added that Barko has been helping take the organization to another level by expanding the selection of fresh, from-scratch meals offered.

“When I started it, I wanted to do something that was fresh and had a lot of quality to it,” he said. “It wasn’t a frozen meal. We will never serve a frozen meal to a senior. That’s why we are excited about the new chef. This is a second level for us. We had a chef previously for 10 years who worked with me from Deli Quench. It was time to move up

another step, and chef Kevin Barko has now taken the reigns for preparing our meals. We're so excited about what's happening with the new menu and new selections for the seniors."

Barko said that they are also seeking input from customers to help with the development of new menu items.

"We're putting together surveys," he said. "We try to get the office staff at Meals of Joy to give us all of their comments. We want to get very close to the customer. We're also going to do that by picking out some customers that like to give us input and putting together a committee, inviting them into the kitchen, showing them around and getting their ideas."

The organization provides meals to seniors from Monday through Friday. They can choose from the main menu option available that day or opt for salads or sandwiches. On Fridays, they also offer deli-style meals with sandwiches or wraps, salads, and fruits for the weekend.

Barko said that he is trying to serve comfort foods that will appeal to seniors.

The menu features items such as chicken teriyaki with rice pilaf; Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes; an Italian sub and potato chips; baked ham with a brown sugar glaze and sweet potatoes; vegetable lasagna and garlic bread; Atlantic salmon Dijon and rice; Italian lasagna and a dinner roll; BBQ pork chops and smashed potatoes; roasted turkey with dressing and mashed potatoes; lemon rotisserie chicken and mashed potatoes; a crispy chicken sandwich and potato salad; Italian cheese ravioli and garlic bread; chicken breast alfredo and rice; and shrimp stir fry.

The organization offers different sizes, including a standard-sized meal, a larger portion called the "hearty meal" and the smaller-sized "bagger meal."

Barko explained that advanced preparation is the secret to a successful operation.

"Staying organized and staying ahead is really the key," he said. "You're always ready a day ahead, doing your prep. When you walk in to start cooking, everything is ready."

The chef and his staff start preparing meals every day around 7 to 7:30 a.m., and volunteers pick them up around 10 to 10:30 a.m.

“All of the delivery bags that they have have heat packs in them, so the meals are kept hot as they are coming to the door,” Cervarich said. “They are ready to eat the minute they get to the door.”

Volunteers deliver the meals to seniors but also provide other services, such as wellness checks. Sometimes, they will spend a few minutes talking to seniors or doing a small task for them.

“It’s just simple things like changing a lightbulb or flipping a breaker switch for a senior that didn’t know what to do,” Cervarich said. “We do a little bit more than just deliver the meal... We have some volunteers, they sign up for certain routes because they have bonded with the clients... We’ve had some that have gone out and done some extra errands and chores for some of our clients because they have that passion. They care for their needs.”

He stressed that interaction is more important than most people realize.

“Sometimes, the food they are getting, and the volunteer at the door, that might be the only excitement of their day,” Cervarich said.

Meals of Joy partners with churches, hospitals, and healthcare clinics, which refer clients to them.

Meals delivered to seniors are free to low-cost, depending on their finances.

Donations and grants make it possible for Meals of Joy to provide meals to those in need. Some churches have funds that they use to purchase meals for their members. The organization also puts on three major fundraising events each year, including a gala.

This fiscal year, Meals of Joy has served over 33,000 meals to seniors in 12 cities in the West Valley. Cervarich projects that it will increase to around 40,000 over the next fiscal year. He said the first month they started 10 years ago, they delivered 13 meals.

Even though the organization has faced challenges over the years, for Cervarich, it was essential to always keep moving forward.

“The one thing that kept me going was I thought about all the seniors who needed this and needed help,” he said. They needed a hot, fresh meal, and I wasn’t going to give up.”

For more information on Meals of Joy, call 623-594-9588 or go to mealsofjoy.org.