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## MEALS ON WHEELS: 21-year Chapel Hill volunteer honored

Katie Jansen

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Herald-Sun

Mary Alice Eckman shares a laugh with Margaret Della Pia on Thursday, May 21, 2015 at Binkley Memorial Baptist Church. been volunteering for 20 years and was recently recognized by the 37th Governor's Volunteer Service Award program. The Christine T. Nguyen

Mary Alice Eckman seems to be everywhere at once.

She's sorting rolls and cartons of milk, double-checking the numbers on spreadsheets to make sure the basket for each Meals on Wheels route has the right amount of food.

She's greeting volunteer drivers and answering last-minute questions before they make their deliveries for the day — every morning, about 150 meals are sent out.



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She's also manning the office phone, handling any emergencies that crop up and answering questions from customers about meal delivery and billing.

The 80-year-old Chapel Hill resident has served in a variety of volunteer roles in the 21 years she's been with Chapel Hill-Carrboro Meals on Wheels. She was the organization's board chairwoman for 14 years, and she's also driven all the delivery routes multiple times.

This month, Eckman was recognized by Gov. Pat McCrory as one of the state's top volunteers for the year — one of 21 people to receive North Carolina's highest honor for volunteerism.

Eckman, who received an award in the senior volunteer category, volunteers about 10 hours a week, although in past years, she spent 20 to 30 hours a week with Meals on Wheels.

She first got involved in Meals on Wheels during a sign-up for a stewardship day at St. Thomas More Catholic Church. She was already somewhat familiar with the organization because her aunt and uncle had volunteered in her home state of Illinois.

"I was a substitute (driver) and before I knew it, I had my own route," Eckman said.

Eckman is modest about her award, continually pushing her fellow volunteers into the spotlight.

“These are the unsung heroes,” she said.

She also said she was “totally taken aback” when she found out the board had nominated her for the award.

Eckman said it’s always been natural for her to help others. She credits her Catholic upbringing by her parents, who she said were “shining examples.”

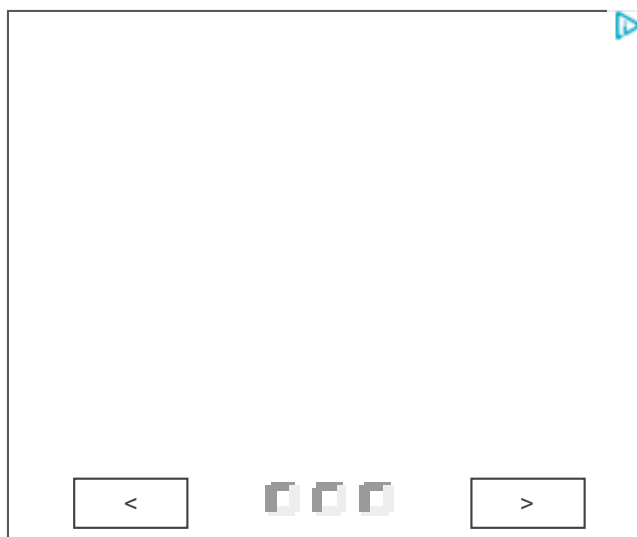
Eckman said she was also fortunate to marry someone with similar values.

“It’s lasted 57 years,” she said of her marriage to her husband, Tom. “It may last a few more — who knows?”

Jokes aside, Eckman describes her life and her marriage as “fun.”

“It’s like two minds working together,” she said. “It’s a weird feeling.”

While raising their three children, the Eckmans were always welcoming people into their home to live with them, from cancer patients to single pregnant women.



"I guess it just becomes a way of life," she said. "Americans grew up learning to help their neighbor."

Eckman said that working at Meals on Wheels is a family atmosphere because most of the volunteers have been there for a long time. She's gotten to watch other volunteers' children grow up.

"It's hard to explain it, but it's something we all look forward to and enjoy," she said.

Eckman also said she's proud of the way that Meals on Wheels retains volunteers. For many, including herself, the act of volunteering has turned into a decades-long experience.

Margaret Della Pia, who has been with Meals on Wheels for about four years, said Eckman is known for her sense of humor and for her deep knowledge about the organization and the routes it serves.

"She's such a giving person," Della Pia said. "She's very sweet. She taught me the ropes, basically."

The volunteers connect with each other, but Eckman said that it's easy to build relationships with meal recipients, as well.

"There's some people you fall in love with," she said. "The interaction with the people — you chat with them, you ask how their day was."

Eckman said that in addition to delivering meals, she also ends up completing other small tasks for the residents, such as resetting a clock or doing laundry.

"Everybody has a story, so listen to it," she said. "It's a tremendously rewarding experience."

