**SO MUCH MORE THAN A MEAL...**

This is the first of a series of occasional articles about the lives of the amazing seniors we are honored to serve. All of our seniors have a story to tell. We just need to take time to listen and learn.

Gerard Gentilella (Jerry) is a handsome man, with a twinkle in his eye and a youthful optimistic air that belies his 95 years. It may be his desire to think about happy times, as well as a natural modesty, that makes it hard for him to talk about the part he played in one of the most important military actions of World War II, the Normandy Invasion.

So, when I interviewed him this July, we started by talking about his childhood. Jerry was born in Staten Island and was raised in Harlem. He was from a large family, one of eight children, five sisters and three brothers. Jerry said: “It was a happy childhood...We were very happy. We were poor, but that was during the Great Depression and most people were poor. We had a happy neighborhood. Nobody closed their doors. In our neighborhood we knew all the people. It was mixed: Italians, Germans, Greeks, Turkish, a real melting pot. They were my best years, during the Depression. Being poor didn’t seem to matter.” Then, with some encouragement from his devoted niece, Lisajoy, Jerry talked about his wartime experiences.

In 1943 Jerry turned 18 and, along with most of the boys in his neighborhood, he was drafted into the Army. After basic training he was shipped to Liverpool, England. On June 5, 1944 Jerry and his unit were on a ship in the English Channel. The troops had no idea they were about to invade France. Jerry thought they were just going on maneuvers. On the morning of the next day, when the weather cleared, Jerry saw land. He didn’t even know that it was France. It was D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Jerry best described the landing on Utah Beach: “That day (June 6, 1944) was the longest. It seemed long, because there was fighting all day and all night. So we couldn’t tell the difference between what day it was.” Jerry’s unit was one of the first to make it on the beach. “So many people got killed during that first couple of hours. We survived. We had good leaders. One guy gets up and he says ‘Go’ and we just went. We didn’t know where the Germans were and we were getting shot at all the time. When you have good leaders that makes the difference. When one guy gets up and he goes forward, you just follow. And that’s all I did all that day.” The fallen littered the beach. “We had to go over. The people that fell before us, we had to step over them.”

Jerry and his unit spent three long days and nights on Utah Beach. Then they pushed forward to the small French town of Sainte-Mere-Eglise. He spoke glowingly of how kind the mayor’s wife of Sainte Mere was to the American troops: “She used to take care of the soldiers. There was a lot of kindness.” After fighting throughout Normandy, Jerry’s unit marched to Belgium, where they spent the winter of 1944, the coldest winter in 50 years. Jerry, like many of his companions, suffered frostbite. The Army doctor was about to amputate Jerry’s feet, but at the last minute decided to try to save them. Jerry is grateful for that reprieve. “Ordinarily, the doctors just cut them off when they turn purple... [But] the doctor said ‘no we can save [his feet]’ And I am thankful for it.”

Jerry’s unit stayed in Europe a full seven months after V-E day, helping to rebuild villages in France. “After the war, we went back into France. We started building up the towns that we destroyed. [The French] had nothing. We built up the towns to give our country a good name. We got a kick out of that.”

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A MAN OF HIS WORD

Several years ago, the City of Trenton cut a $20,000 Community Development Block Grant to Meals on Wheels of Mercer County that subsidized 20 homebound individuals who had no ability to cover the cost of their meals.

At the time, our CEO went and testified several times as to the necessity for those funds to support the homebound seniors whose incomes are below the poverty line, living on a very limited monthly income.

Although the city never restored the grant, at one of the city council meetings a gentleman came up and spoke publicly to the value of our program to the seniors in Trenton. Afterwards, he approached our CEO and told her that if he ever ran for Trenton city council and won, he would donate his salary to Meals on Wheels.

This past May, Mr. Santiago Rodriguez ran for an at-large seat on the Trenton City council, and won! And as he promised, he appeared at our offices with his first check, and his promise to continue to donate it over the next four years of his term.

We are exceedingly grateful, not only for the funds he is contributing that will support so many meals over the course of the next four years, but that we are the ones fortunate enough to give testament to the actions of a man who keeps his word to the betterment of his community! Bravo Councilman Santiago Rodriguez!!!

TWO EXCITING NEW PARTNERSHIPS IN LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP!!!!

Starting this fall, we are launching new relationships with two outstanding institutions in Lawrence Township! We are very excited to announce that Meals on Wheels of Mercer County has forged new partnerships with Rider University and Meals on Wheels of Lawrence Township!

Rider University has become our new caterer, providing healthy meal options for our seniors! Gourmet Dining Services (also new to Rider) will make available to us their culinary expertise, under the guidance of their dieticians and executive chefs. This will allow us not only to continue to meet the dietary and temperature requirements mandated for our program, but will also offer healthier menu options not available to us previously. In addition, MOWMC will help Rider University continue to fulfill their mandate of student engagement in the community by involving their students in the many different aspects of our non profit services - from meal prep to meal delivery, grant writing, participant reassessments, program evaluation, benchmarking, and internal systems upgrades. Our mutual hope is to groom future leaders in the not for profit sector! The possibilities are endless.

Meals on Wheels of Lawrence Township has decided to merge their services with Meals on Wheels of Mercer County effective January 1, 2019. After 43 years of service, the organization felt that, in order to better meet the needs of their participants, joining with a larger organization with the same mission would afford their participants more services and supports, while avoiding a duplication of efforts. Meal delivery will be transitioned seamlessly, and will continue unaffected for the current and future participants needing services. We are very excited to welcome our new Lawrence participants and volunteers to the MOWMC family, and they will be right at home with our new catering partner located in their hometown!

WELCOME PAULINE!!!

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County welcomed a new Director of Program Services this past summer. Pauline Leung brings a wealth of experience in the mental health field. This positions her perfectly to offer assistance as she enrolls participants in our program, especially to those who live completely alone without family support and may be experiencing anxiety or depression.

Pauline earned her Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from Boston University and Master’s degree in Counseling from Cairn University. She is well versed in topics such as faith, parenting and self care. “I am very excited to become more involved in my community by serving the elderly and individuals with disabilities,” says Pauline. We are blessed to have such an experienced professional caring for our seniors!

DID YOU KNOW . . . ?

Of our current participants:

- 44% are over 80
- 64% are female
- 87% require a subsidy for their meal
- 52% reside in Trenton
- 60% live alone
- 63% have remained on our program for over 1 year
SO MUCH MORE THAN A MEAL.... (Cont’d from page 1)

Finally, in 1947, Jerry was shipped home from the French port of Marseille. His brother and sister were on the dock in New York City waiting for him, the same brother and sister that had seen him off three years earlier. They brought some of his favorite Italian foods, “So my brother and sister brought some sandwiches, some Italian food, mozzarella. That was better than any parade in New York, to see my brother and sister after three years.”

The homecoming was joyous, but like many soldiers Jerry’s transition to civilian life was not easy. The term post-traumatic stress syndrome was not used in the 1940’s, but that is indeed what Jerry suffered from. For several years he was unable to speak, except to his young nieces and nephews. It took five years before Jerry was able to return to work in the textile industry in a factory in Brooklyn.

Today, Jerry is grateful for his life and the support he receives from Lisajoy and Meals on Wheels. He was thrilled that morning when the Meals on Wheels volunteer brought her six-year-old daughter with her. “The Meals on Wheels came this morning and the mother brought a child, who is around six years old. And she introduces me to her, to the child. Now I am seeing another generation with this young girl. I feel honored that the mother should bring the child with her on Meals on Wheels. I am thankful for the Meals on Wheels because I meet so many young people. The people are really helpful.”

(written by Carol Welsch, MOWMC volunteer)

My Uncle Pete is a proud veteran who served in WWII at a young age. Since his health has recently declined, we feared that he would have to give up his independence and go on assisted living this year. We knew that would be devastating for him. So, it has been a tremendous relief that he was accepted to be a recipient of Meals on Wheels in February.

Now, he continues to live independently thanks to you—the volunteers at Meals on Wheels. You all have enabled him to keep his pride and dignity which means a great deal to him and our family!

With sincere thanks, Peter

MEMORIAL & IN HONOR DONATIONS

In Memory of Clifton “Cliff” Mellan
Martha Glahn

In Memory of Pamela Gwozdz
Caroline Conlon

In Memory of Pamela Gwozdz
Iris Engelson

In Memory of Pepe Agourides
Lynn, George, and Paul Mimidis & families

In Memory of Sandra Campbell
Geraldine Eure, Esq.

In Memory of Susan Manning
Deborah & Jeff Maracani

In Honor of her 16th Birthday
Angela Dong

CAN YOU SPARE A FEW HOURS A WEEK TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Please consider joining us in providing nourishment for the body and the soul!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

call: 609-695-3483 or
email: volunteer@mealsonwheelsmercer.org

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING SENIORS
Meals on Wheels of Mercer County is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. All contributions are tax-deductible.

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THANK YOU

...to all of the generous individuals, civic groups, houses of worship, schools, corporations and foundations throughout 2018 for your generous contributions. You help us turn no one away who needs a meal!

In an effort to save on postage and trees, we will acknowledge all of our donors in the online edition of our 2017-2018 Annual Report posted on our website.

In addition, thank you to those who have provided thoughtful and creative gifts for our participants throughout the year - they are a wonderful addition to our meals!