

Agency aids elderly

Hot food, kind faces

By DARRELL LANFORD

One person comes to the door in a wheelchair. He is missing a leg and has been wheelchair-bound all his life. During the day, he is totally alone. At night, a relative helps him around.

Another person—an arthritic, wizened black woman—rests in a chair. She has a difficult time moving her aged body around, so she usually remains in the chair.

What do these people have in common, aside from both suffering from debilitating defects and perhaps loneliness?

They participate in the Meals-on-Wheels program, a Brazos Valley Community Action Agency program that sends hot meals and cheerful faces three times a week to about 200 elderly people in Brazos, Leon, Burleson and Robertson counties.

One social worker, called an outreach worker, is Marilou Mitchell. On a typical day, she delivered 19 meals to assorted houses in Bryan. Four volunteers, who get paid gas mileage, delivered about 35 meals to other Brazos County residents.

The meals Mitchell delivered, all packaged in aluminum foil, were received with smiles and hellos and occasionally a casual conversation.

In some instances, Mitchell brought the meals into the houses, because the residents could not make it to the door. In other instances, friends took the meals to the door. Sometimes the recipient would be waiting on the porch.

One elderly woman, with one hand dangling uselessly, slowly put the meal on the porch table, opened the door, then cautiously picked up the tray, held the door open, and walked inside. Mitchell said she wondered when the day would arrive when the woman would not be able to open the door.

Mitchell said some of the recipients are entirely dependent on others for food. On Tuesday and Thursday, when meals are not delivered, relatives, neighbors or social workers usually make the meals, she said.

On two bleak days last winter, deliveries had to be cancelled. The dependency that resulted from the missed meals showed how dependent the people were on Meals-on-Wheels, Mitchell said.

The day starts early for some workers. Floyd and Mildred Swanze start preparing food at 4 a.m. They usually work until about 12:30 p.m. Volunteers start by preparing the meat, then cook the other foods.

The Swanzes and three other workers then start dishing the food into the TV-dinner trays about 9 a.m.

By 10:30 the meals are ready to be delivered. Contract workers bring the meals to centers in three surrounding counties where they are picked up by volunteers or outreach workers. Volunteers are always needed, Mitchell said.

About 200 meals are served in a normal day. This month, the program will expand and 275 people will be served three days a week, said Melba Johnson, a Community Action worker.

There is already a waiting list, she said. Some find out about the program through their neighbors, some call in and some were contacted when the program first began in June, 1977, she said.

Funds for the program are provided by the Texas Department of Human Resources. Four outreach workers, one for each county, determine the eligibility of the applicants.

There are various criteria for Meals-on-Wheels applicants. A person under 65 can receive meals only if income is not more than \$363 a month. Two people living together cannot earn more than \$474 a month and receive the meals. A person over 65 cannot receive more than \$410 a month and for two persons the limit is \$537 a month.

The Meals-on-Wheels program evolved from the Years for Profit program. That program sets up community centers where people can get a free meal each weekday in a social setting. When officials found that some people could not attend the centers because they had no transportation or just were not able to get out of the house, Meals-on-Wheels was developed.

There are no stringent criteria for the Years for Profit program. Persons 60 and over who cannot afford to eat adequately or lack the skill to prepare meals qualify. Other criteria are limited mobility or having feelings of rejection or loneliness that lead to not wanting to eat alone. Spouses also are eligible.

The Years for Profit program started in 1972. About 700 meals are served each weekday in Bryan, College Station, Hearne, Calvert, Franklin and Caldwell. They are also served in Somerville, Buffalo, Centerville, Navasota, Brenham and Madisonville.

Meals for both programs are prepared together at the central kitchen on Bryan Street. The

kitchen was constructed only a year ago. Until then, the food was cooked at the Allen Military Academy.

Adjoining the central kitchen is the dining-recreation room for the Years for Profit program.

Kandy Rose, director of the dining center, said about 60 to 70 people come to the center each day. About one-third are brought in a van, Rose said. These people do not walk or cannot drive a car, cannot walk to the center or cannot get to the center by any other means, Rose said.

"Most people here are no longer married, want companionship and cannot make the effort to cook a meal," she said.

Social activities are also provided. The center has two sewing machines, a bottle-cutting table, a stereo, library books and continuous domino games.

The center is open from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. Some people are there from the time the door opens until it closes, Rose said.

Each person who eats a meal there is asked to give a quarter. The estimated meal cost is \$1. Some give more, but some cannot afford to pay anything, Rose said.

One pleasant effect of the center is the cultural exchange that takes place, Rose said. About one-third of the patrons are black, one-third white and one-third Mexican-American.

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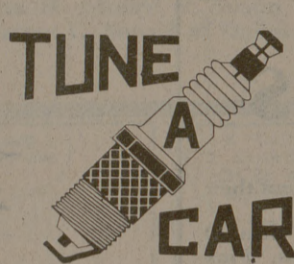
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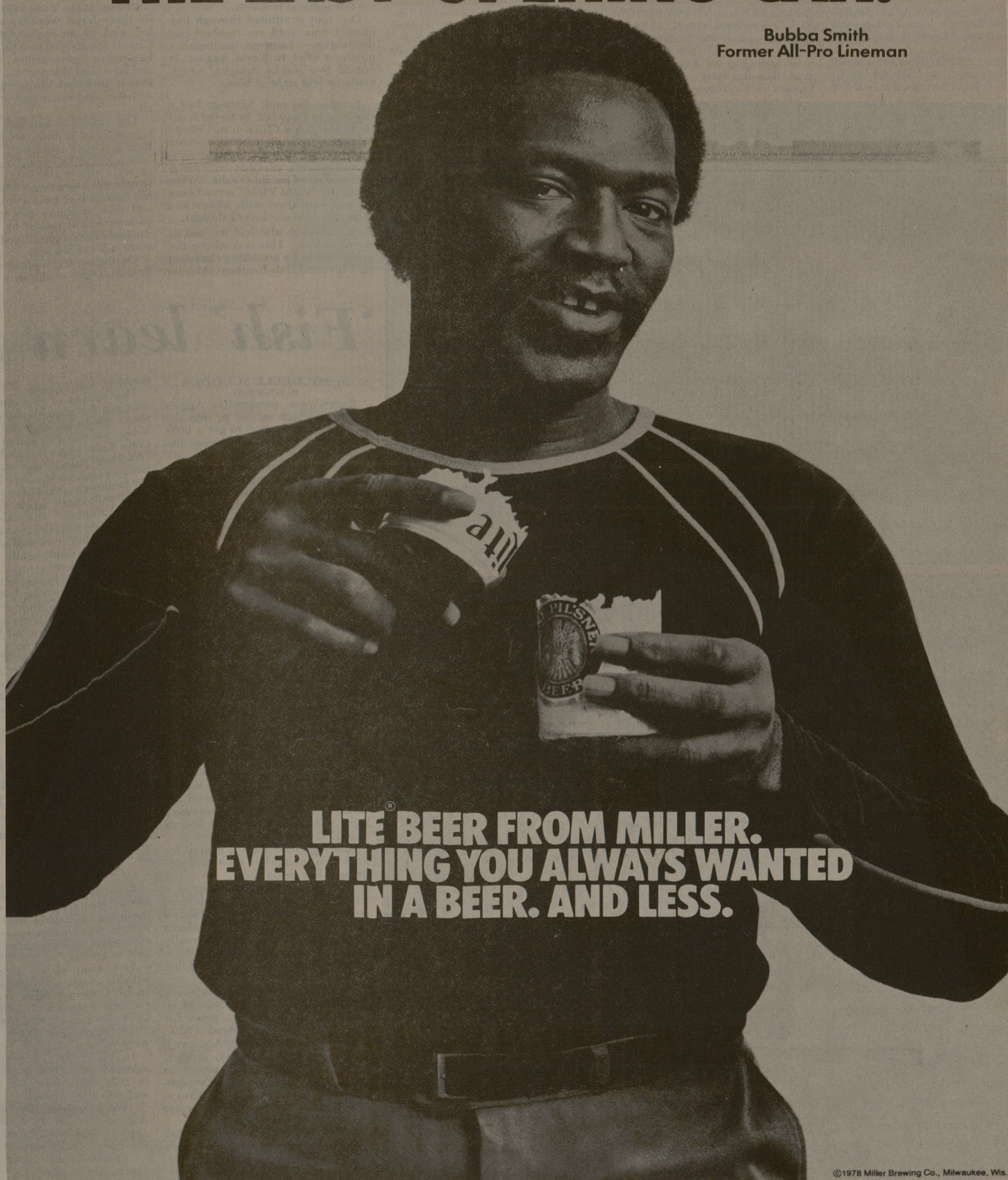
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