

# The woman behind the wheel

By HOLLY LEHMAN, Staff Writer



**MOLLIE DUGAN**  
Dedicated volunteer.

"There is not another one like it. There's only one Kosher Meals on Wheels," says Mollie Dugan, the 77-year-old volunteer coordinator of the B'nai B'rith Women's program, now in her 19th year on the job. Nor is there another Mollie Dugan,

the "very Orthodox" Jewish woman with scores of volunteer positions under her belt. Dugan is the type of woman who has given success to Jewish communal agencies throughout modern Jewish history in Pittsburgh. She has been president of Adath Jeshurun Sisterhood for, "I don't know how many years." They refuse to nominate anyone else. She serves as a type of answering service for her grandson's construction business.

She lovingly cares for her husband David of 60 years. Her two grown children live in Pittsburgh as well as all five of her grandchildren except for one who is studying for her doctorate in sociology at Ohio State. And three of her four great-grandsons live above her in a duplex on Farragut Street, allowing them to truly experience their great-grandparents.

"I am very actively involved with all of them," she says of her "crown jewels," blue eyes flashing.

One of her great-grandsons, 10-years-old, comes downstairs to watch the Pirate games with her. He also spent election night with her "watching the electoral returns. I gave him a little history lesson," she chuckles.

Rich experiences that many children and most great-grandparents don't experience so fully in today's world. In many ways, she is a throwback to a time when 'me' and money weren't first and foremost.

In her role as chairperson of Kosher Meals on Wheels volunteers, Dugan accepts the ultimate responsibility of coordinating the delivery of over 30 meals on any given week. There are five routes traveled Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and over 15 volunteer drivers "who are without peer," according to Mollie.

"My name is synonymous with Kosher Meals on Wheels," she relates. Ironic since the name Mollie Dugan is often assumed to be Irish. She was never asked to be the coordinator. Instead, she "grew into the job."

It was about 20 years ago when Mollie gave up most of her outside activities to care for her mother who was in what was then the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged. "My mother was sick and I was there every day. B'nai B'rith Women would ask me all the time to help with Meals on Wheels but as long as my mother needed me I couldn't do

it. I was also president of the Sisterhood at the time," she adds.

"I always went to Riverview and would park in the back and walk through the kitchen where they were preparing the meals for Kosher Meals on Wheels and they would ask me when I would help them."

When Mollie's mother passed away, the program had been in existence for a few years and was coordinated through a few women from B'nai B'rith Women. Though Mollie had always been active, she found it difficult to jump right into things after the death of her mother. She finally agreed to help make phone calls for the group.

"I would spend all day Sunday on the phone setting up deliveries for the coming week, and it was a mess," she exclaims.

Mollie noticed that she was calling the same people every week to remind them of the same routes and responsibilities. In addition, the two or three women coordinating the efforts were not communicating and never knew what the other was planning.

"Little by little I organized it. I told all of the drivers that if they couldn't make it to let me know ahead of time and I would find a sub," she explains.

"The majority of the recipients would have to be in a nursing home if it weren't for the meals because they can't shop and they can't cook. They can have independent living for a much longer time," she explains.

Deliveries include two lunches and two dinners consisting of soup, sandwiches, and a frozen dinner tray along with bread, salt, sugar, jelly.

"And they always do it special for the holidays. For Thanksgiving they'll probably get kugel, sweet potatoes. Before Pesach, they always get honey cake, matzo and a bottle of wine. They get strictly Passover meals," she adds.

It is through Mollie that social workers from Jewish

Family Services along with the Riverview kitchen, the drivers, the recipients and their families all stay in sync.

A person in need of kosher home meal delivery contacts a JFS social worker who assesses the situation, "based on need, not ability to pay" stresses Mollie. At that point, a new client is added to the list and Mollie is notified.

From there she alerts the drivers of the appropriate route. But that's not the half of it.

If a client doesn't answer their door, the drivers tell Mollie. If a client does not look well, is unkempt or seems depressed, the drivers tell Mollie. And nothing escapes her. She is almost a type of patient advocate in this role, on the phone to social workers immediately and following through with hospitals, drivers and family members.

Since Mollie's tenure, she has seen a gradual change in the volunteers who, at one time, were all women. Now, Mollie explains, "A lot of the men started delivering with their wives. If the wife would get sick, instead of quitting, the husband would take over. Or, if they needed helpers to make deliveries with them, they started using their husbands instead of other volunteers.

"Then, after a while the husbands would tell them to stay home and sleep in while they would go make the deliveries," she smiles.

"It runs very smoothly," she says. The system is so finely tuned that Mollie can relieve herself of much of the pressure, as she puts full trust in her volunteers.

"If they go away and can't do it, they don't even bother

me; they find a friend. I have one volunteer who goes away from November to April and when he gets home, before he even unpacks, he calls me to let me know he's ready to start again," she relays.

She admits to experiencing aggravations at times. "Whenever there's a goof," she adds, "it's never the volunteers and I'm not just saying that. They put their heart and soul into it, going to Riverview every week, picking up meals and making deliveries. These volunteers: there's no one like them," she maintains.

Ironically, Mollie has never met some of her cherished volunteers, as most of her work is done over the telephone. "Over the phone, we're all buddies. They all know everything about me and I know everything about them but I might walk right by them in a store and never know it," she laughs.

At one time, a luncheon was held for all volunteers but that practice has faded. "Luncheons aren't for me, I could care less. I don't need that. Certificates, they can give me, who needs it, I don't need it," says the woman who owns folders stuffed with awards, including a recommendation from then-President Ronald Reagan for Volunteer of the Year.

I get such pleasure out

of doing this," she says, firmly denying any attention or special treatment. "But I would like some recognition for the volunteers," she adds.

Mollie is in it because it makes her feel good. "I never belonged to a bridge club or a gin club. They would invite me and say 'What do you do with your time?' but I do so much," she says, revealing what really matters in her life.

"When I could walk better I didn't even need a list of substitute drivers. If it was snowy and someone couldn't get out of the driveway, I bundled up and did it. But I can still think and my brain is functioning and I'm contributing. That makes me feel good. As long as my brain is active and I have a phone, I'll do this," she states with certainty.

She worries at times, when she realizes that nobody really knows how her job works. "I don't have books and papers," she says. "It's all up here," motioning to her head.

Last March she had to have knee surgery and insisted on missing only one week's worth of work. By February, she was still searching for someone to fill her shoes for just one week. Finally, one of the volunteer drivers offered. The social workers at Jewish Family Services tell her that when she leaves her post, they'll have to hire and pay

two people to do her job.

"I just know that a lot of Jews in Pittsburgh know my name and who I am which is nice. It makes my children and grandchildren proud," she says, over the booms of an older grandson stopping by on his daily visit to his grandparents and their two dogs. "I don't want to vegetate and this keeps me in touch. I talk to people all day long.

She says that the winter months are especially difficult because many of the drivers leave Pittsburgh for the winter.

So Mollie may not lead the life of a typical 77-year-old great-grandmother. The tv blares as the door swings open and shut with family. The two dogs bark at the sprite footsteps of three young boys on the back staircases and her husband gets in and out of his sick bed. An oversized fish tank takes up an entire living room wall. "I'm boarding my grandsons' fish for a week while he moves," she laughs.

It is this tummel, Mollie says, that keeps her going. The door closes behind her and the fog of cigarette smoke and Mollie lives happily ever after. They won't need to worry about replacing Mollie Dugan for years.

For information on volunteering for Kosher Meals on Wheels, call who else, Mollie Dugan, at 362-0774.

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