

Around the Community

Achiezer at 13: A Talk with Suri Bender

Part 11 of a Series

By Avi Shiff

In honor of Achiezer's 13th year, we are conducting a multi-part series celebrating the various facets of this remarkable organization. For Week #11, we spoke to Suri Bender of Achiezer's Meals N' More division.

Suri, thanks for giving of your time to speak to us. Please tell us about the Meals n' More division of Achiezer.

Suri Bender: The Meals n' More division provides complete Shabbos meals – plus – for those who are hospitalized over Shabbos and yom tov. Volunteers deliver homemade meals to designated hospitals upon families' request. Food packages include grape juice, chal-



lah, main dishes, side dishes, hot kugels with warming bags, cookies, candy, magazines and more.

We deliver all this to St. Johns, South Nassau, Mercy, Northshore, LLJ, Winthrop NYU, Nassau University Medical Center and other Manhattan hospitals by special request.

These meals are especially appreciated in hospitals that do not have respite rooms or in situations where a patient, such as a *kimpe-turin*, can't get to a respite room.

How do people request such meals?

Achiezer has a phone extension and email address for meals, where people provide their information, letting us know which hospital they are in. People usually call on Thursday and Friday for that week.

That doesn't give much notice for you to prepare the meals. How do you do it?

At this point, we've been doing this for many years, so we have an idea of approximately what's needed each Shabbos, but I am in touch with the office staff who let me know if it's been a busy week or a quiet one at the local hospitals. I send out a text message to our three coordinators, who direct the volunteers, instructing them on what to make. Each volunteer is responsible for one food item, such as kugel, egg salad or gefilte fish. Each food is covered by several volunteers. It's an organized system. And let me tell you: We send a lot of food! The packaging is always the same, so people know what they're getting and have a certain familiarity.

Once the food is prepared by the volunteers, what happens next?

The volunteers deliver their food to the kitchen at Achiezer's Far Rockaway headquarters. Everything is carefully labeled and refrigerated. On Friday, at midday, we coordinate for volunteers to package the food. Friday afternoon, the packages are delivered to the various hospitals by yet another volunteer. When we receive calls very close to Shabbos, we have the packages delivered via a non-Jew.

Sounds like a truly outstand-

ing operation!

It really is. The packages are amazing, thanks to the selfless volunteers, who take such pride in what they do and go out of their way to make the packages as nice as possible. There's one volunteer who sends separate containers of ketchup, mustard, pickles and olives every week to top off each package, and she did so after she had a baby. Another volunteer prepares delicious dips and packages them professionally. The small touches and creativity of these volunteers add so much to each package.

There are young girls who, at their bas mitzvahs, had an activity to create flower arrangements or challah covers to be included in these hospital packages, enhancing them. We also have candle packages prepared by TAG's preschool division. Everyone wants a part in this special mitzvah.

The feedback is really tremendous. People love the small "add-ons." They really make a big difference.

Your volunteers' devotion is deeply inspiring.

The volunteers never fail to amaze us. One Friday, I met someone who was dropping off fresh challah that she had made for that week's packages. She was celebrating her son's bar mitzvah that Shabbos, yet she made fresh challah Friday morning!

Sometimes we need more food at the last second, and there are people who just never say no! They are always there for Achiezer.

We are very heavily volunteer-based in this division, with about 100 people who cook the food for Shabbos, plus the packagers and the drivers. We couldn't do it without all these extraordinary people.

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