



Mary Alice Eckman

Mary Alice Eckman grew up in Chicago, met and married her husband Tom, and together they raised three children. In 1992, when the time came for retirement, Mary Alice and Tom chose Chapel Hill for their retirement home, and they moved here 23 years ago.

Her career as a volunteer began in Illinois with an Easter Seal Guild. As a new resident in Chapel Hill, Mary Alice continued her commitment to service, impressed with the range of services offered in the community, including programs for the homeless, health care, affordable housing, and public transportation. She quickly became involved in community activities, and volunteered where she could be of help. She remembers, "It was the best way to meet great people and to find a place in the community." She continues to be a dedicated volunteer in many of the town's organizations.

Mary Alice's first involvement was with the Chapel Hill Service League. For several years prior to its closing, she was the volunteer Business Manager of the League's Country Store. As a member of the League, she became active with the IFC, cooking meals for 17 years, serving on the Board and on the Strategic Planning committee. A fond memory is working with a few dedicated volunteers at Community Cuisine, teaching cooking skills to youth during summer camp. She continued this activity during the school year, working with students at Lincoln Center and Special Education at East Chapel Hill High School. When her husband Tom became involved with Freedom House, she committed herself to four years of daily delivery of surplus food to Freedom House, to IFC and to other organizations in the area. She became known by the residents as "the bread lady".

Meals on Wheels was - and still is - Mary Alice's primary and most meaningful involvement. She began work with the local agency 21 years ago. She has delivered meals, organized and driven routes, trained drivers, created a partnership with ARC, prepared advertising and grants, and served as Chair of the Board for 14 years. She still organizes the route for Thursday deliveries. Mary Alice recognizes that Meals-on-Wheels does more than deliver food because a visit from a volunteer becomes an important part of the recipient's life and daily schedule. She believes every person has a story to share and her visits with recipients give her an opportunity to hear those stories. The joy in the work, she says, is that the volunteers get as much reward as the person receiving the meals. She feels close to the people on her route, and says "I fall in love with all of them."

Mary Alice has a generous spirit and compassion for those in need. She believes in the power of positive thinking, love and perseverance. Her rewards come from knowing she has made a difference in someone's life by something as simple as a smile and words of encouragement, and she hopes that each person she touches knows that they are loved.

Mary Alice is aware of the growth of Chapel Hill, even as she notes that the Meals on Wheels routes continue to expand. She recognizes that development is necessary but she hopes the town will retain "a little bit of heaven", with a sense of history and a continued commitment to service.

In 2015, Governor McCrory recognized Mary Alice Eckman as one of the top volunteers in the State. Her contributions to the Chapel Hill community have made a difference in the lives of many citizens.