

## We Call Ourselves the A-Team

That's because on the 7 to 10 am Friday breakfast and lunch packing shift Alison and Alice are two of the dependable regulars. But there are many more of us who make up our well-oiled machine. When I arrive about 6:45, Ed is already in the back storeroom getting the boxes of lunch fruit cups and Elke and Karen have brought out the breakfast applesauce and cereals and are opening boxes and filling bins with grits, Cream of Wheat and oatmeal packets. When Alison arrives, she pitches in helping Ed open the fruit cup boxes. I get some of the basic equipment we need such as a trash can, set of wheels and the bins for the breakfast and lunch sandwiches and extra milk packages. Everyone knows what needs to be done and we work together to make it seamlessly happen. We know that "Food is Medicine" for MANNA's clients and we want to do the best job we can to package their meals for the week.

Diamond, our assistant packing staff member, starts bringing out the dollies full of lunch soups and salads and breakfast trays while our boss and head packer Chris completes counting up the various required diets needed for the day's packing session. He give me the daily count of bags we need for the morning and I count out the bags for the lunch side by color-yellow, green and black to start, then red, other and standard. Today we have 310 meals to pack, a little higher than normal, but not as many as before some holidays when we pack up to 400 meals for MANNA clients. The A-Team is not fazed.

As the rest of the A-Team, Alice, Bill, Brona, Mike, Ricky and Sandy, arrive at MANNA, they pitch in opening boxes of small cartons of milk which Ed has brought out from the freezer. There are three ways we check that we have packed the correct number of meals. On the breakfast side, the milk cartons have been counted out exactly, on the lunch side, the bags I counted out by color are the check, and the final, triple check is at the end of the line, where Chris and Diamond affix the colored dots to the bags according to the various dietary requirements. Today the A-Team was in top form and we came out even, but some days I miscount the bags, or we come up short on a milk carton or two because of a mistake.

Finally everything is set up for our assembly lines and we are ready to start. I do a quick count of the breakfast line to be sure we have seven breakfast entrees. Yes, three trays, one sandwich, two instant cereal packets and one box of cereal. We have learned from our mistakes, which we joke about with Chris, hoping we only make the mistake once. I'm not saying the A-Team is perfect. One morning we only packed six breakfasts, and one morning we mistakenly started putting the oatmeal packets in the first set of breakfast bags, but the oatmeal packets have too much sugar for the first dietary breakfast bags. But today we're good to go by 7:30 which is a very good sign. The A-Team is ready to roll!

## Supply Sergeants Keep the A-Team Going

The A-Team of breakfast and lunch packers on the early Friday morning shift at MANNA works seamlessly because we have two team members who act as "supply sergeants". Bill works the lunch line, making sure Brona's sandwich bins are filled and Ricky, who starts the line by putting four quart containers in the bags, has all he needs. Alison adds the four fruit cups and at the end of the line is Beth, who puts in the bread rolls and ties the bags.

Sometimes Cindy or Joan L. come in to help, and we are always glad when they arrive, but the walk-in volunteers are great too, usually students from Drexel, and we enjoy visiting with them and getting to know about their studies. The Drexel students are uniformly great helpers—they see what needs to be done and get the hang of our assembly line quickly. Finally at the end of the lunch line is Ed, who puts the lunch bag, now bulging with containers and packages, in a larger heavy bag, which he passes over to Diamond and Chris.

On the breakfast side, our supply sergeant is Michael, who always keeps busy supplying me with the racks of breakfast entrée trays and keeps Alice in boxes of milk cartons. The pile of milk cartons on the far table is daunting when we first start, but we slowly whittle it down as the morning goes along. I start the breakfast line by putting two, three or sometimes four trays of breakfast entrees in a plastic bag hanging from a bag holding dispenser like those in the grocery store. We thank the volunteer from another day who, a few years ago, brought in the bag dispensers when he saw how we awkwardly had to open each bag by hand. That's an example of how the MANNA volunteers are always looking for ways to more easily and efficiently do our assigned chores.

Alice is next, and she puts in four milk cartons and a sandwich or two, then Karen adds the packets of Cream of Wheat and grits and boxes of cereal such as Corn Flakes or Total. Finally, at the end of the breakfast line, Elke has perfected the knack of grabbing five butter packets in one swipe, adding them to the bag, and tying it closed, a harder job that you would think. She passes the filled breakfast bag to Diamond and Chris, who put on the correct color sticker indicating which diet it is prepared for and then add it to the big bag with the lunch bag. Chris ties the big, now heavy bag and passes it to George, who has arrived a little later with his colorful apron his family made especially for him for his MANNA days. George volunteers at MANNA several mornings a week, and for us he's essential in hefting the heavy bags up onto the rolling racks in their proper order. He is a valuable part of the A-Team and many other groups too.

Occasionally as we are passing the bags down our assembly line, Chris will call out "Brona, will you please do four no pork for me?" She replies "Yes Chris, four no pork coming up." Then Brona knows to reach down on the lower shelf for the alternate sandwiches Chris has supplied her to substitute for the pulled pork sandwiches on the regular rotation. Or he will call down to me asking me to substitute for the seafood quiche trays that I am packing in the breakfast bags.

When we switch diets, Ricky starts a new color bag and Mike changes the milk cartons, say from regular to lactose-free milk. I always check the sandwiches and trays to be sure there is no cheese in them when we are doing the dairy-free diets; Chris has supplied me with substitute sandwiches for those clients.

In the meantime, Bill and Michael are supplying us with trays of items to put in our bags, removing the empty cardboard boxes (we seem to generate a LOT of cardboard boxes, which we have all learned how to flatten efficiently using the "Vetri Method" that we learned from another volunteer.) Mike rolls away the towers of empty racks and takes the boxes of flattened cardboard back to the recycling bins in his rare spare time. With the help of our supply sergeants, the A-Team moves along quickly.

## The Final Push

Soon it is time for the A-Team to take a break. After we've done the yellow, green and black diets, we have a quick rest in the break room, enjoying the coffee, tea and cocoa, plus cookies that volunteers have made and our front desk staff members Jody and Taylor have brought out for us. While we are socializing about Karen's knitting or Brona's latest recipe experiment. Alison's pilates classes, or Ed's work at the Tyler Arboretum, Chris and Diamond are rolling the towers of trays and quarts no longer needed back into the freezer #8, which is adorned with a big poster of Christopher Walken, because of course the refrigerators and freezers that line the wall are called "walk-ins" in the food biz. (It always makes me laugh, seeing that poster!) Chris and Diamond put on their heavy coats and gloves to go into the freezer when they are moving towering piles of food around; we occasionally also need to slip in to grab an extra milk carton or a few more soup quarts-it feels great on a hot summer day, but not so much on a cold winter one.

The A-Team starts up our assembly lines again for the last push, when we do the majority of the packing. The red diet, for diabetic and heart patients, always requires the largest number of meals, usually well over one hundred. Then comes the "other" category, encompasses all the miscellaneous meals from small portions to no pork, beef or seafood. Finally we usually pack about seventy-five "standard" meal bags. We watch the pile of boxes of milk dwindle until Michael finally brings Alice the last box. Amazingly, it is almost right about the same time Ricky is filling the last lunch bag on his side. Last Friday was a first; we were finished packing 310 bags by 9:30!

## Breakdowns, Our Least Favorite Chore

Then comes our least favorite job, but again, the A-Team has figured out the most efficient way to get it done so it doesn't take long. "Breakdowns" are bags of meals prepared the week before which for some reason were not able to be delivered to the clients. We've just finished packaging hundreds of meals, and now we have anywhere from five to twenty five bags to unpack! You can see why it's not our favorite job. But George moves the box of butter pats down to the front of the line and brings out the empty boxes we've saved for the job. Michael begins lifting the heavy bags out of the bin up onto the counter and Karen gets the scissors to open the bags. Ed takes the lunch bags over to his side and starts by putting the bread rolls back into the plain and whole wheat boxes, and then passes the bag back down the line for Brona and Alison to remove the sandwiches and fruit cups. Finally Ricky takes the quart containers of soups and salads and organizes them by type. We do the same on the breakfast side: Elke takes out the applesauce containers, I remove the cereal boxes and packets to their various bins and boxes, and Ed or Sandy takes out the sandwiches while Alice puts the milk cartons back into boxes, then George puts the various breakfast trays back in racks. Everything gets used again and nothing goes to waste, because the frozen meals have remained frozen the entire time.

While the A-Team is packing, or unpacking, there is a little time for visiting, catching up on what we have done during the week. We don't chat long, because we need to pay attention to be sure we're putting the correct number and type of meal item in each bag, but the time goes quickly as we work. We josh each other a little bit, and are uniformly polite in saying please and thank you for the help that we offer each other. Head Chef Keith Lucas usually stops by to greet

us and we salute him with a “Good Morning Chef!” The work of the A-Team goes seamlessly because while we each have our favorite area to work, we know what the other has to do, and if there is a time we are short because one of us is away on vacation, we can move up or down our assembly line to add another item or two to the bag. On rare occasions, when vacations and illnesses have come at the same time, we have only had three or four people on each side of the assembly line, and we are not lucky enough to finish by 9:30 as we did today, but unless someone has a special appointment or obligation, we stay until the job is completed. We are the A-Team! And we know our job is an important part of MANNA’s mission.