

November

Giving Thanks at the Sunnyside Diner

by Mathilda Gregory, Editor-in-Chief

Six years ago, Toby Jeffreys fell off a ladder and broke his pelvis. He spent that Thanksgiving at a rehab center. As he remembers it, the holiday was looking like it would be nothing but long and lonely.

“The rehab center is about twenty miles away from Hardy Falls, and we’d had an early snowstorm, so the roads were pretty bad. My family doesn’t live around here anyway, and we’re not that close, so they didn’t come. The nurses and aides did what they could, but they were short-staffed and running around like nuts. Let’s just say I was not in a cheery frame of mind.”

In fact, Jeffreys admits it was one of the darkest days of his life. Then everything changed.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bunson came in to visit Mrs. B’s mother, who’d fallen and broken her hip. I knew who they were, of course. Everyone in Hardy Falls who’s been to the Sunnyside Diner knows them. But that day they were just like rays of sunshine.” Mr. Jeffreys smiles. “Or maybe angels.”

It seems that Mrs. Bunson’s mother had been placed in the same rehab facility as Mr. Jeffreys, and even though the roads were slippery, the owners of the Sunnyside Diner had taken time out of their busy day to make the trek from Hardy Falls to bring her some holiday cheer. But they didn’t stop there—they included everyone else on the floor.

“I just remember cookies and some kind of pastries that tasted like heaven,” Mr. Jeffreys says, still smiling. “And Mr. and Mrs. B. came around and talked to everyone, brought trays of food for the aides, and basically shined all over us right when we needed it. They couldn’t stay more than a few hours, but I’ve never forgotten it.”

And that’s one reason why Mr. Jeffreys has spent his last four Thanksgivings working as a volunteer waiter at the Sunnyside Diner, serving his fellow townspeople of Hardy Falls.

“I’m happy to be here,” Jeffreys said when asked why he would willingly spend the holiday working, especially when it’s still a little tough for him to be on his feet for hours at a time due to his injury. “That day in rehab showed me how something you toss off as normal can be important to somebody else.”

He starts the day by delivering trays of cookies to Hardy Falls Manor Nursing Home and, weather permitting, to the rehab center where he spent so many months. Then later in the afternoon, he comes back to the Sunnyside and straps on an apron to get ready for his shift.

“It’s not a big deal,” he insists, shrugging. “Don’t make it something it’s not. The Sunnyside has always been a place to go on Thanksgiving for me and a lot of other people in town. It’s important that it can stay open. After what the Bunsons did for me, I’m happy to help them out.”

“We were thinking we’d have to close on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day because it was getting harder and harder to find people to work,” says Becky Bunson. “Everyone wants to spend those days with their own families, which I completely understand. And we can’t afford to pay them much extra for working...it was getting very difficult. When we were younger, Stan and I could pick up the slack, but not so much anymore. Toby found out we were thinking of closing those days and he volunteered to help. He convinced a few others to come, too. Now I don’t know what we’d do without our volunteers. I would have hated it if we’d had to close on the holidays.”

So would many of the people of Hardy Falls.

“There are a lot of us old folks in town,” said Albert Cromwell, a resident for over 83 years. “I can go to my daughter’s house, of course, but lots of times she’s busy with her husband’s family on the holidays. Most of my friends have children or grandchildren around, but we’re all in the same boat. We usually end up at the Sunnyside. It’s nice to see everyone and to be able to sit down to a home-cooked meal without worrying about the mess of it all.”

“My son and his family are in Texas,” said Doris Amato. “So unless I fly, I’m alone. I don’t know what I’d do without the Sunnyside. I come here to see my friends, and I can just enjoy it all.”

“The holidays aren’t always easy for people,” said Cleo Tolliver, one of the other volunteers. “It’s great that there’s a place people can go so they don’t feel alone. The bowling alley restaurant is closed, so I come here to help out for a few hours on Thanksgiving and Christmas. It’s nice.”

“The funny thing is, I don’t even remember the Thanksgiving we visited Becky’s mother,” said Stan Bunson when we tracked him down in the kitchen at his big grill. “I mean, I remember her falling and being in rehab, but I don’t remember it being such a huge deal.” He laughs. “We take food wherever we go, so I guess it didn’t seem all that unusual that we took some with us when we went there.”

“It might not have been a big deal to them, but it was to me,” says Mr. Jeffreys. “Now I’m hoping we’ll be a big deal to other people.”

And, as a person who spends Thanksgiving at the Sunnyside Diner talking with her friends, I can assure you that they are.