

Nutrition challenge for lonely seniors

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It's dinnertime. Do you know where your parents are?

More importantly, do you know what they're eating?

Chances are, if your parents are elderly and eating alone, they are not getting the nutrition they need.

And they may not be getting the mealtime companionship they need, either.

That's according to new research conducted for the Home Instead Senior Care network showing eating alone and poor nutrition go hand-in-hand in for seniors.

Rose Settecase, of Maple, has seen that first-hand.

While Ms Settecase's parents are elderly, they eat well and are healthy, loading up on produce from her father's overflowing garden, her mother still cooking up a storm in the kitchen and "always sending us home with a bagful of food".

That may be because they live close enough for frequent family visits and have each other to ensure good food is on the table.

Her mother-in-law, on the other hand, is not doing as well. A widow who lives in the east end of Toronto, she usually eats alone.

The Settecases can't visit her as often and when they do, they are disappointed by what they see. Sometimes they arrive to find food sitting on the counter "for who knows how long", the elderly woman's skin pallid and her spirits low.

"She eats poorly, doesn't cook properly, she gets disoriented in the kitchen and she eats occasional leftovers but only when she feels like it," Ms Settecase says.

The 82-year-old is on "seven or eight" medications and says that when she does eat, it makes her feel sick — so she doesn't eat.

"It's a vicious circle," Ms Settecase says.

With her Italian background, big family meals were the norm. "That's what mothers do, they cook for the family," her daughter-in-law says. "The sense of purpose is not there anymore so she lets herself go. She has no one to cook for and she can't be bothered.

"When she's with us she eats a lot better. The colour in her face is revived," as are her spirits, she says.

She knows her mother-in-law would be better off with a live-in companion or living with relatives, but broaching the topic can be difficult.

"You have to handle it delicately because they can be offended."

'WE ALL NEED COMPANY'

The Settecases are not alone in their worries. Aging baby boomers are discovering that their elderly parents are craving companionship, which is why Home Instead has launched a campaign and recipe contest to raise attention to the issue.

"The findings are very clear," says Kevin Chen, Home Instead franchisee for Richmond Hill, Thornhill and Markham. "There is a real link between companionship and healthy eating... Emotionally, we all need company."

Chen points to research conducted by Home Instead — a provider of non-medical care services for seniors — that shows a majority of Canadian seniors (88 per cent) believes having someone to share meals with makes those times more satisfying.

But those same seniors say that several factors get in the way of mealtime companionship: not being able to drive (23 per cent),

family and friends don't have enough time (22 per cent) or living too far away (17 per cent).

Carol Greenwood, a nutritionist, senior scientist at Baycrest and professor at the University of Toronto, says the social aspect of eating is even more important than good nutrition.

"Seniors who eat alone often have an underlying isolation and depression and lack of social engagement. This leads to low quality of life and a more rapid decline as they age."

Carol Edward, director of community programs with York Region's Community & Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS), agrees.

"Social isolation is the number one thing that will expedite deterioration in seniors," she says.

'MORE RAPID DECLINE'

Today's elderly generation is not accustomed to frozen convenience meals, she says. It's especially difficult for seniors from ethnic groups used to creating large meals for big families with fresh fruits and vegetables that may have been abundant and inexpensive in their homeland.

This can lead to poor eating habits, nutritional deficiencies, dehydration, problems with balance and risk of falls, she says.

It's what's prompted Home Instead to develop a public education program called Craving Companionship to revive family mealtime.

Mr. Chen and the Home Instead Senior Care office in Thornhill is encouraging family caregivers to find a favourite family dish, prepare and share a meal with their senior loved one, and enter the recipe — along with a story about what makes the dish so special to their family — in the Homemade Memories Recipe Contest.

Selected recipes and stories will be posted online, as well as in a cookbook which will be sold to raise money for the non-profit Home Instead Senior Care Foundation.

The idea is not just to help seniors plan and prepare nutritious meals, but to let them relive family memories with home-cooked meals, says Mr. Chen.

No need to convince Harold Fuller of the value of family mealtime.

The resident at Parkview seniors residence in Stouffville laughs remembering how futurists, years ago, predicted that one day society would turn to a single pill that would encapsulate all nutritional needs and do away with the wasted activity of preparing and consuming food.

"Well, of course that was all thrown out the window," says the 85-year-old retired journalist. "They didn't realize the value of sitting down for meals. You can't become hermits."

As a child, he and his five siblings were required to sit at the table until everyone was finished eating — something he believes was good for digestion and conversation.

"Now my grandson just chucks down his food and that's it."

Body and soul both benefit when it's done right, he says, which is why he and his wife order monthly from Meals on Wheels and adhere to strict sit-down mealtimes.

"The body gets into a rhythm: intake, digestion and disposal."

Meals on Wheels is one of several services provided by CHATS to help seniors eat nutritiously. Designed by dieticians, the delivered entrees provide 65 per cent of daily protein requirements; the nutrient plays a key role in



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Lorna Fuller and her husband, Harold, eat a nutritious meal at the Parkview Village seniors residence in Stouffville.

maintaining muscle strength.

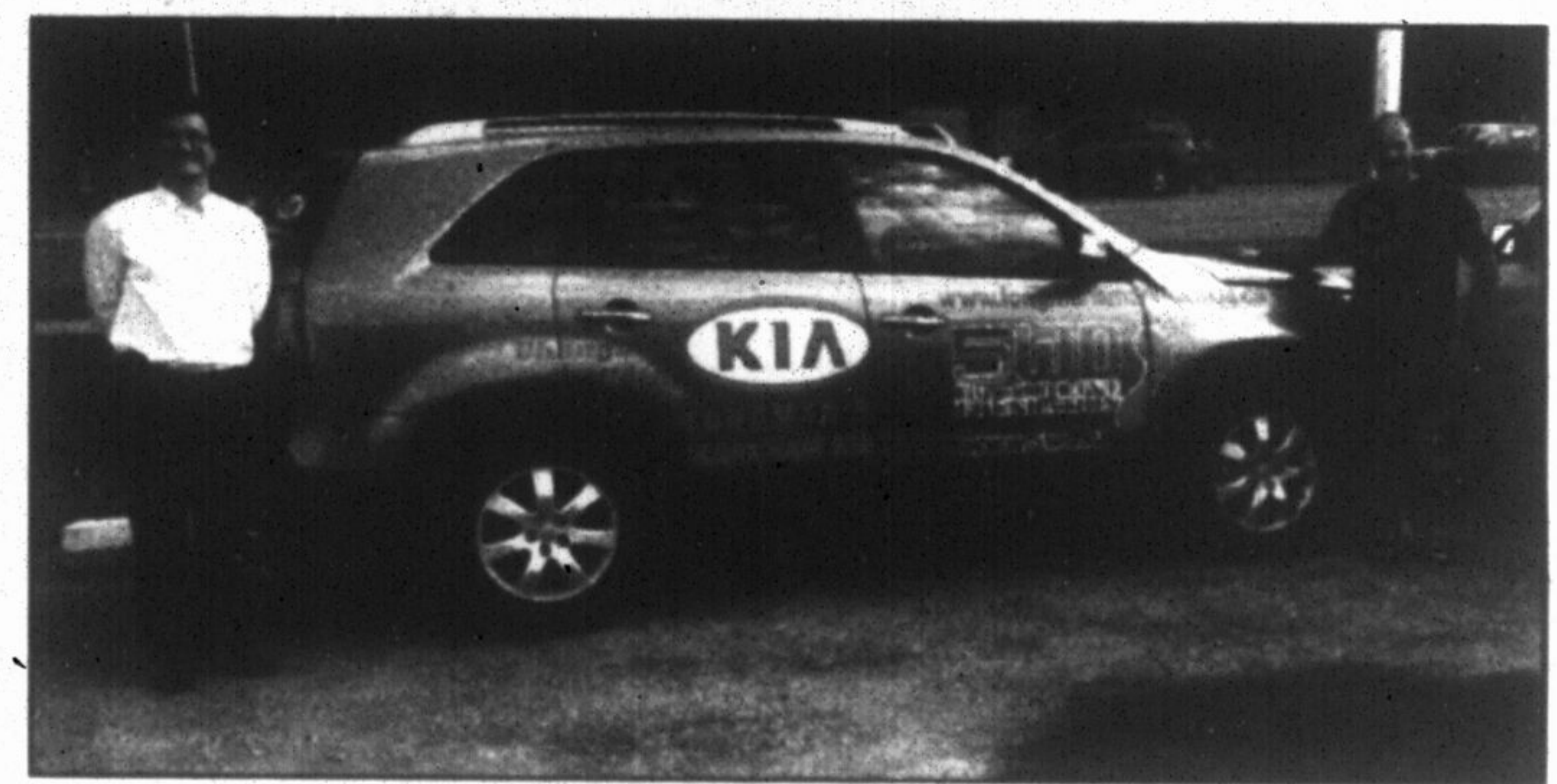
CHATS also operates a "congregate dining program" to provide a social mealtime experience for seniors in residences or community centres.

For information on CHATS services, visit

chats.on.ca or call 1-877-452-4287

For tips on senior mealtime and to learn more about the Craving Companionship recipe contest, visit <http://www.mealsandcompanionship.com/>

In Our Community



Mario Wong General Manager of Longman's Markham Kia pictured here with Andrew Rossi from Five With D.R.I.V.E.

Steve Longman Dealer Principle of Longman's Markham Kia has donated a Kia Sorento which will be going towards the cause of making routine runs to serve the homeless, and people at risk living on the streets of Markham. Providing personal hygiene needs, seasonal clothing, survival equipment, and medical supplies. In addition the Kia will be used as a shuttle vehicle to pick up, and deliver food to local clients that are assisted through the use of the Five with Drive food bank. The Five with D.R.I.V.E Foundation is a volunteer based organization, located in Markham, Ontario. The foundation is run whole heartedly on a volunteer basis that provides the core of making a difference in the lives of others. Founded in 2004, The Five with D.R.I.V.E Foundation has supported many local causes and organized various fundraising events across York Region. For more information visit their website at www.w5d.ca.