



RAE ANN GAEDKE



COURTESY PHOTO

IN APPRECIATION

FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

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A thousand-watt smile and food magic made all of Rappahannock Rae's Place

BY DAPHNE HUTCHINSON | *Special to the Rappahannock News*

Rae Ann Gaedke spent a lifetime turning food into love.

At Nature's Foods, Mountainside Market and Rae's Place, for potlucks, benefits, fundraisers and barbecues, in restaurants and home kitchens, she practiced her magic. The bibbity-bobbity-boo was equally divided between tasteful and healthful, and a single bite

See **RAE, Page 12**

RAE

From Page 1

could transform veggie avoiders into veggie advocates, thanks to the likes of Broccoli and Friends, Magic Mushroom and other originals enlivened by the pixie-dust sauce of Rae's House Dressing.

It was community-centered cooking.

Brunch at Nature's Foods, with guest chefs Phil Drevas and Vinnie Deluise, was a relaxed and comfortable Sunday morning institution in Washington. At dinners featuring familiar faces as guest chefs, many a rural, small-town foodie was introduced to sushi and other tastes then rare or nonexistent in the Blue Ridge foothills. In one memorable collaboration with the theater, which was then Freeman Allen's Magic Mountain Cinema, the audience gathered at Nature's Foods for a chili feast before dancing two blocks to "The Last Waltz," the nostalgic documentary of The Band's farewell show.

Folks talk about the old days when Washington had kids instead of tourists and homes instead of B&Bs. That family-friendly feeling was evoked in the 1980s because on weekday afternoons, the school bus regularly dropped off a dozen or so youngsters at Nature's Foods, where they had bikes, boards, skates and jump ropes stashed for play. Parents set up charge accounts for after-school snacks and drinks, and Rae volunteered as House Mother for the lot, keeping one eye on the store and restaurant, one on the crew, until parents swung by after work to collect their progeny. And the arrangement continued, off and on, into the summer months.

The county's young sports enthusiasts owed their first chance at soccer to Rae. The School Board had balked at fielding a high school soccer team, calling for "demonstrated interest" before action. So, Nature's Foods sponsored a squad in neighboring Fauquier County's well-established adult league — all high schoolers led by two "grown-up" player-captains with soccer experience. The Nature's Foods novices learned more than they won, but their commitment proved interest, and Rappahannock County High School added soccer to its schedule.

Thirsty Thursdays helped make Mountainside Market a magnet for locals looking for welcome, frosty refreshment and good food. And Rae's Place provided a ready outlet for local truck gardeners with extra tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, squash or carrots, as well as a first job for a score or more of neighborhood teenagers.

She was often the first connection to the Rappahannock community, as newcomers took a lunch break from unpacking or explored the county's attractions and had their first Rae encounter. "Oh, that smile and the twinkle in her eyes. You were instantly convinced that she was authentic and generous," recalled May Jane Capella, looking back decades to when she was a new teacher at the elementary school. It was Friday night, there was music and Nature's Foods was packed. Her future husband introduced his date to Rae. "She locked on to me like I was the only person in the world, asked me questions about myself, and I felt so welcome."

Rae was such a fixture here for a half century that it's hard to believe she was ever a newcomer herself.

She arrived in the county from Florida in 1974, a young wife, with her husband Bob Haase, whom she'd met when both were students at Brevard College. It was a dream vision of a dot on the map of Virginia for a town called Washington. And they answered. No job, no house, no contacts, just faith and a feeling of rightness.

Rappahannock was an employment wasteland back then. Besides jobs with the schools and the highway department, there were occasional

the first Nature's Foods and celebrated Take-Your-Children-to-Work Day year-round, bringing first Adam and then Jessica to the store. The business outgrew its space three times and in its fourth jump, Rae added a restaurant.

Next door to the post office in the center of Washington, this was both the liveliest incarnation of Nature's Foods and Rae's busiest business. It featured the after-school drop-offs, a waiting line for Sunday brunch, live music, pop-up gourmet dinners, Christmas classes making gingerbread houses, baking for the Small Farmer's Market, sponsoring youth teams and

and it showed in everything she did," remembered Theresa Reynolds, whose family, with kids about the same age as Adam and Jessica, lived next door for years. "She had so much warmth and energy that children as well as adults were automatically drawn to her. I saw her pick up Adam and Jessica at once so neither would feel left out. She gave the same kind of attention to my children, always with patience, good humor and endless hugs."

And all the while, Rae catered.

"Eclectic, natural and always delicious," is Jim McCullough's description of Rae's food. A chef for the past 25 years, he's been a long-time follower of Rae's cuisine, starting as a teenager with Five Easy Pieces, and cooking with her on special occasions over the years. "She came up with amazingly interesting flavors that, even as a chef, I can't put my finger on. But always, always delicious."

"Rae was a pioneer who exposed us to wholesome natural ingredients and proved that meals could be both healthy and delicious," said Heidi Morf, chef at Flint Hill's Four & Twenty Blackbirds and Twenty Four Crows and a close friend for decades. "Great soups, tasty-but-good-for-you cookies, spring rolls at the drive-in or simple veggie sandwich in pita with tahini dressing . . . If Rae made it, you knew it wasn't only good, it was good for you."

Rae's version of job-hopping ended with her marriage in 1988 to Brian Ross and their collaboration on Greater Sperryville's new Mountainside Market. For more than a decade, the combination restaurant, deli and market was a social and networking center. With its inauguration of an annual Rappahannock Music Festival weekend, it also became a showcase for local musicians. When the business closed with the ending of the marriage, Rae stayed in Sperryville, buying a house off Woodward Road, co-parenting Cy and Stevie Rae, and launching new restaurants, first at Rae's Place next door to the old Emporium and then at Rae's on Main Street. In 2010, her widowed mother's declining health took her back to Florida, and Rae was her caretaker for five years until mobility issues necessitated her mom's admission to a nursing facility.

Rappahannock's attraction remained strong. Although a fire started by a freak lightning strike had destroyed her house just a few months after she left the county and her business was also gone, Rae packed up her unquenchable optimism and talent for making the best of things, and came home.

She picked up where she left off, turning food into love, as soup chef at Headmaster's Pub, and then moved on to the role of personal chef. She was enjoying her most favorite role — mom and now grandma — where she also excelled. And she was joyfully anticipating a little granny cottage to be built at daughter Stevie's place on Sperryville Pike. Of course, the little house was to have a little kitchen perfect for making a little magic. The same magic that she worked right up to her sudden and unexpected death on June 2. When Rae was found, looking for all the world like she laid down for a nap, there in the fridge were the meals, waiting to be delivered.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Rae Ann Gaedke and her children: (left to right) Cy Parker, Adam Haase, Stevie Ross and Jessica Ketola. "Bring Your Children To Work Day" didn't begin in 1992 with Gloria Steinem, and it wasn't limited to April 25. Rae was a whole-hearted endorser and celebrator of the practice, as needed, a decade earlier as she juggled mothering with cooking and minding the store.



Feeding the county: Mountainside Market and Rae's Place & Deli



openings at country stores, family restaurants, gift shops, and the little garment factory on the outskirts of Flint Hill. Most work was on a farm, in an orchard, in a packing shed. . . or you could find a hole, get creative and fill it with a business of your own.

Her husband started a trash service job in town. Rae, pregnant with their first child, stayed home and taught herself how to cook. Soon she was delivering Hungarian mushroom soup to a sick neighbor and baking baklava for the birthday girl down the street. Orders for dinners came next, and a half century of catering began. When she couldn't find the natural, organic ingredients she wanted, she opened

donating to every good cause that asked.

The vagaries of love, life and business carried that dazzling smile to other outlets.

Divorced, Rae started a one-woman cleaning service for homes and offices. She partnered in a video rental business and sponsored another soccer team. She sold original jewelry and jeweled treasure boxes on consignment in local shops, incorporating semi-precious stones collected when the three Gaedke sisters spent family vacations traipsing through western deserts, looking for quartz and turquoise.

All the while, she juggled parenting and jobs. "Rae loved being a mother,

► **Rae Ann Gaedke's celebration of life** will be held at 2 p.m. on Saturday, June 17, at Hearthstone School in Sperryville. Friends and neighbors are invited to join the celebration and share memories.

Chef Rachel Rowland's magic ingredient: Love

The well known — and much loved — chef was a Rappahannock institution. Then she fought a devastating disease to the end: 'Rachel Rowland even made the best of death.'

BY DAPHNE HUTCHINSON
Special to the Rappahannock News

“You could taste the love.” That’s an homage to the culinary creations of Rappahannock chef Rachel Rowland, 52, who died Monday, Sept. 25, at Autumn Care, a nursing home in Madison.

The words are from Jason Campbell, Rachel’s sous chef, wheelman and grill man for eight years at Flint Hill’s Griffin Tavern. His sentiments are echoed in tribute after tribute posted on her Facebook page as news of her passing spread through kitchens in the region and beyond. From dishwashers to prep cooks to line cooks, she mentored scores of young people.

“She cared about what she could do to make the lives of people around her better,” recalled Josh Bywaters, who moved on from Rachel’s tutelage to fine dining restaurants, including The Inn at Little Washington. “She was protective of her close family of kitchen people. She always had time to listen, and she always cared about what you had to say.”

“She tried to save anybody and everybody,” said tavern owner Debbie Donehey, describing Rachel’s relationship with her team. “I loved that about the tavern’s kitchen. Rachel pulled everyone together when help was needed.”

Christy Neece Lee from Claire’s at the Depot in Warrenton wrote that Rachel “loved with all her heart and always gave her best.”

Liz Grey, also from Claire’s, described Rachel as “the most humble, kind and genuine chef” she’d ever worked with. “She absolutely



COURTESY PHOTO

THE KITCHEN OF MISFIT COOKS who celebrated with rock ‘n roll singalongs while they prepped, grilled, simmered, sauteed and splashed in the pit. (Never forget the dishwasher because Rachel sure didn’t!) *Front row:* Jason Campbell, Rachel Rowland, Mary Francis Bywaters, Becca Hunter. *Back row:* Wayne Larkin, Debbie Donehey, Austin Huff, Jason (Toj) Ratcliff, Dylan Meredith.

rocked upscale cuisine,” Grey posted, describing her gourmet entrees as “just chock full of heart and soul.” And in a nod to her specialty, Grey added: “If you’ve never had a Rachel sandwich, you have not lived.”

But Rachel wasn’t born to cook. Certainly, she didn’t think so. For the child who moved to Castleton in 1981 when she was 11, it was horses, horses and more horses. She was going to be a rider, trainer and breeder when she grew up. That is, if she couldn’t turn herself into a horse first. She spent untold hours playing with the neighbor family’s two elderly thoroughbreds and an outgrown pony that she rode when she wasn’t pretending to be his stall mate.

Jim McCullough was one of the kids next door. Later, he became a chef, so he and Rachel renewed their friendship over the years with shared stories of adventures in food. But his abiding image of her is still an 11-year-old, prancing through the fields, stretched out on the grass to catch the sun, pawing at the river water and nickering to her four-legged friends. “I’d catch glimpses from the window, and in her

head, she absolutely was a horse.”

Rachel missed the proverbial storybook childhood. She didn’t know her father, and her mother Carol faced financial challenges as a single parent raising Rachel and her older brother George. When she was four, her mom became assistant director of Glaydin, a private residential school near Leesburg. The little family prospered in the school’s supportive environment for years, before moving first to Texas and next to Florida, finding part-time jobs, then returning to Virginia and landing in Castleton. Keeping to the vagabond lifestyle, Carol and the children lodged with friends in old and small houses on Route 729, before moving on to several residences in Fauquier County.

“If you’ve never had a Rachel sandwich, you have not lived.”

LIZ GREY
Claire’s at the Depot

Passion for cooking begins

Now on her own, Rachel launched into the hospitality industry as a waitress at the Rail Stop in The Plains. But it wasn’t long before she found her comfort zone in the kitchen. Back in the county, harmonic convergence put her under the influence of Rappahannock’s original “food is love” advocate, restaurateur Rae Gaedke of Nature’s Foods and Restaurant in Washington. At Rae’s Deli, Rachel mastered the fine art of sandwich making.

Next, she went on to Four and Twenty Blackbirds in Flint Hill, where an apprenticeship under Heidi Morf served as her Culinary Institute. She did several turns at Four and Twenty and again when the business transitioned to Twenty-Four Crows, spending a decade in the kitchen with Heidi. “She learned a lot, and she took her cooking to another level,”



Growing up in Castleton, Rowland’s first passion was for horses.

➔ Morf said. “Rachel loved food. She was obsessed with it – the flavors, textures, colors and presentation. She loved layering.” Which is why her increasingly popular sandwiches sometimes towered a foot tall, Heidi added with a chuckle. “And she made what she called a mush pot – layered food, like grits, cheese, shrimp and veggies. But sandwiches were always her favorite thing.”

In between stints in Flint Hill, Rachel refined and grew her culinary skills as chef at Claire’s at the Depot in Warrenton and Magpie’s Café in Middleburg.

Jason Campbell met Rachel the day she was hired as chef at Griffin Tavern. The man whose firing had created the vacancy was his son’s godfather who had brought Jason on board at the restaurant, and Rachel knew that story. Her first words to Jason were, “Are you okay?”

And heartened by that opener, his response was, “Do you like hugs?” “Which is exactly what we did, and we loved each other from then on,” Jason said, describing Rachel as “the smartest high school drop-out ever,” “someone who gave to others when she didn’t have anything for herself,” and “a chef on the verge of greatness ... Rachel’s job was her life.”

From eight years spent mostly in the kitchen, Jason’s favorite memory is Christmas cookie day, when after hours and hours of baking, decorating and boxing, Rachel and he would load up her jeep, music blaring and jacked up on coffee, for cookie deliveries to Griffin’s regular customers and supporters at wineries and B&Bs. “It was her feedback, when she heard from the folks who loved her work. At the restaurant, she was much too shy and private to venture into the dining room for kudos from happy diners. This was the only time she allowed for compliments.”

She pursued her cooking passion after she left the tavern in 2009, making several starts toward her goal of a sandwich shop named in honor of a dear cat, Mr. Littles. (A little irony there, given her foot-high sandwiches.) She upped her gifts of meals to folks who were sick or going through hard times. She helped at the Rappahannock



COURTESY PHOTO

Rowland with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Griffin Tavern owner Debbie Donehey when the justice stopped by the Flint Hill restaurant during a visit to the county in 2017.

Food Pantry, teaching classes to introduce customers to new ways of preparing food normally available on the shelves and fixing innovative combinations for volunteer lunches.

But there was to be no storybook ending.

Grim diagnosis

She lost her little rented cottage in the woods a couple of years ago, where she’d lived her very private life for 19 years, turning rocky soil into fairyland gardens of flowers and vegetables and her home into an artful gallery of treasures. There, she was a welcoming hostess for visitors, with tea and tasty tidbits ready ... if she knew they were coming. However, unexpected arrivals, even dear friends, sent her scurrying to turn on the shower and hide. She was a great friend, but friendships were always on her terms.

The immediate cause for her move was the landlord’s need for the house for his family, but it was also time for Rachel to end living on her own. Repeated falls, increasing weakness, coordination issues and fatigue made it too dangerous. She was in and out of hospitals for tests, and there was worry that she would withdraw further into isolation. Then came the diagnosis: multiple system atrophy (MSA), a rare neurological disease that causes brain areas to deteriorate. Ultimately fatal.

But instead of plunging her into

despair, it was a catalyst to return her to herself. “In a way, it was a relief,” Campbell recalled. “Finally, she knew what was wrong. Finally, she had an explanation for the falls, the clumsiness and the sweats. She understood what was ahead of her, and she accepted it.”

Everyone who knows Rachel recognizes her talent for always making the best of things. Moving from her cottage to a shared house in Sperryville, she asked first off if she could reorganize the kitchen, reported her new housemate, Maureen Day. “And day after day after day,” their friendship developed over pre-dawn games of Scrabble and lots of talk. “She had such intuitive wisdom, and she was extremely kind and gentle – with everyone but herself!” Maureen added.

Rachel gave generously and gracefully, said friend after friend, but she had difficulty accepting kindness in return. That had to change if her life with MSA was going to be the best that it could be.

Rachel’s cane was replaced by a walker to be replaced by a wheelchair. When that wasn’t enough, she had support and comfort from her home health aide, Manu. After two years, when she could no longer use her legs and was beginning to lose the use of her arms, she needed full-time attention and

moved to Autumn Care nursing home. A Support Rachel Team moved with her.

Friends and admirers redirected their efforts. They had helped cover her rent and brought companionship and favorite foods when she was living in Sperryville. Now they combined resources to pay the difference between a shared cubby and a big private room in Madison. More importantly, they streamed through Autumn Care, coming multiple times every week to visit and deliver meals up to Rachel’s standards for taste and presentation. Most important of all, one of those supporters adopted her prized possession and beloved cat, Satchmo.

“Rachel really, really loved cats,” confided Sue Foote, a friend of 28 years who took the cat. She had been Rachel’s housemate at Mt. Defiance, the 200-year-old stone house they rented in Middleburg in 2001, and her co-worker at Magpie’s, where Rachel was head chef. “Life didn’t allow her horses and dogs, so she poured all her love for animals into cats.”

And Rachel kept on making the best of things.

“She had tremendous grace, and she never complained,” said Maureen Day.

“In bed, unable to move, she still greeted everyone with a smile,” said Donehey, who was a regular visitor in Madison.

When Rachel had to graduate to an electric wheelchair, she posted, “I’m free! Now I just need to achieve ramming speed!”

“Ice cream time is official!” she announced when she entered hospice.

And when a limit was put on her time, Rachel spent the end of her days reaching out and reconnecting with lost friends and making amends to those she felt she’d wronged. “She stayed on that little phone and said goodbye to so many people,” Donehey said.

John Bloom, once her boyfriend and forever Rachel’s dear friend, offered the most appropriate benediction: “Rachel Rowland even made the best of death.”



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Angela Dawne Grisby Carter
July 20, 1959
October 6, 2012



**Caleb Ezra
Wingert Proper**
October 8, 1980
April 22, 2002



Bessie Freeman Grisby
May 23, 1936
August 27, 2023

Oh How We Miss You. Sharron & Family

Mimi Forbes' farewell to Food Pantry

'IT'S HARD TO WALK AWAY' AFTER 14 YEARS

BY DAPHNE HUTCHINSON
Special to the Rappahannock News

The big man in cowboy boots and a Stetson strode confidently up to Mimi Forbes' desk early one morning near the end of the Covid epidemic.

"Here," said the stranger, handing the food pantry manager a crisp \$100 bill. "This is for you. I saw Willie Nelson last night, and he said we should all support our food pantries," the man explained, echoing the country music icon's admonition at the televised Farm Aid concert. "It's why I'm here.

No one should go hungry in Rappahannock County."



BY JUDY DESATNI

After 14 years of tipping the scales at the pantry, Mimi Forbes files the last receipt for the final donation accepted on her last day as manager.

See **MIMI**, Page **12**

MIMI

From Page 1

That moment captures what it's all been about for Mimi Forbes since she was hired to open the Rappahannock Food Pantry in 2009. "It's the support of everyday people that has meant so much to me. They donate money, they contribute food and, equally as important, they give their time and talents as pantry volunteers.

"My only regret is that there are still hungry people who are too proud to come to the pantry for help," she continued. "And even now, there are folks who don't know we have a food pantry. That's sad, because we are right here, in the county, for them."

Retiring after 14 years as the guiding spirit who made the pantry into a welcoming and happy place, Mimi doesn't fit the pantry keeper mold – or any mold, for that matter.

An interior designer by profession with offices as *Designing Woman* in Denver and *Mimi Forbes Design* in West Palm Beach, she wasn't typical there either. She launched after a single course in design at UCLA, taking off from an experience base that included hotels and the hospitality industry in New York and Los Angeles, law offices as a paralegal, the stock market, and a shipping company in Monte Carlo (following four weeks immersed in a French language school). She was a ski monitrice on the slopes in Switzerland. She worked in galleries in Paris, Montecito and Caesars Palace and while in Vegas, she raced dirt bikes as a hobby. She decorated her own beautiful home in Nassau and buzzed around the island for two years on a motor scooter. Along the way, she married and divorced, and while she was navigating the twists and turns of her chosen path, she was advised by a friend to drop everything and head to Virginia. That friend was the artist featured in Mimi's first show at the gallery in Montecito, and she had settled south of Charlottesville. Mimi took the good advice, found Fauquier County and it took only an "Evening Under the Stars" in Warrenton to convince her Virginia was home.

While she scouted out clients and opportunities to re-establish her one-woman designing business, she worked in a lighting shop, as a recreation supervisor for a health and rehabilitation center and from 2005 to 2007, as an interior designer for a new over-55 community in Ruckersville. She also found a little cottage surrounded by lilacs in neighboring Rappahannock and began the decorating remake to transform it into her dream home.

The outgoing and vivacious newcomer was soon a familiar face, especially after she connected with Tom Benjamin who was executive director of the Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement. Through that contact, Mimi led an eco-tourism group for seniors to Italy, organized fund-raising dinners and set up benefit golf tournaments. Benjamin was also involved with Fauquier's Community Action and its food bank. Meanwhile, back in Rappahannock, cosmic coincidence was at play as the search began for a pantry manager.



BY DAPHNE HUTCHINSON

Daisy, Tobey and Inky now take priority for Mimi's time.

Plant-A-Row for the Hungry, an effort started by Hal Hunter, the county's top originator for do-good ideas, was threatened by its own success. There were so many folks growing extra for give-away from their gardens that a central point was needed to handle collection and distribution. Why not put in a little more effort? Why not make it a full-fledged year-round resource to help feed people in need?

And so, the pantry began here under the non-profit umbrella of Fauquier Community Action, and Benjamin also had a suggestion on who should be the founding manager. "I've got the girl for you!" he announced, introducing Mimi Forbes.

"She had great people skills," recalled Hunter. "She was friendly, a good talker, always cheery and smiling. You just knew she'd make people feel welcome and wanted, and that's exactly what we needed for a new pantry – someone who could sweep away any reluctance and discomfort to accepting help."

Hers was the new pantry's only paid position, and it was part time, limited to the three days a week that the pantry was open. The rest of the staff – shopping partners for clients, shelf stockers, drivers to gather food donations, janitors, drivers to deliver to home-bound clients, event and fund-raising organizers and helpers – had to be volunteers, and they needed to be recruited and trained.

In a life-time of work, including self-employment, Mimi had never supervised and directed others. "I was

responsible for myself and no one else. The only thing I worried about was meeting the expectations of customers and clients and keeping them happy." From years of striving towards that goal, she built the skills that would serve her well as the first-time boss of a brand-new venture. As sole proprietor and operator, she had to be organized. She was a good listener. She paid attention. She was inventive and original. She had a memory for names, faces and the facts of people's lives. Her big welcoming smile was real and immediate, and she sought to understand before she tried to be understood.

That combination made for success from the start. The little-pantry-that-could opened next door to the old school in Washington, in one room on the Mount Salem Avenue side of Harris Hollow Foods. Mimi was a constant feature on the Rappahannock scene, collecting clients, volunteers and donors at events, at church, at country stores, on library visits, in doctors' offices, at automotive repair shops and beauty parlors – anywhere and any time local folks congregated.

Food Pantry takes off

By the end of the first year, the pantry had about 100 clients, and volunteers numbered near 50. Special pick-ups for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners were added, with shoppers arriving at designated times to drive through and collect boxes with fixings for their holiday feasts.

Growth everywhere was steady, and cramped space became more cramped. The pantry's unisex bathroom doubled as storage for precarious towers of shopping boxes. The "warehouse" was a modular shed – the pantry's first expansion – and volunteers pulled and pushed a flatbed wagon loaded with cans and perishables up the hill for restocking. Another of Hunter's bright ideas brought volunteers to loaned space in the schoolhouse to assemble backpacks of food that went home for elementary-aged kids on weekends, holidays and summer vacation. Pantry Day in Rappahannock was inaugurated with scattered food drives across the county, flower sales, a pet parade and the annual fund-raising dinner held at a grand home of a pantry benefactor.

Another growth spurt came after board member Bette Mahoney's heroic work to clear the bureaucratic hurdles and complete the mountains of government forms for the pantry's own non-profit status. The Rappahannock Food Pantry stepped out from under Fauquier Community Action's umbrella into independence and soon into a new location in Sperryville. A pantry van now picked up donations from the expanded ranks of grocery store supporters, including two Food Lions, Wegman's, Costco and Trader Joe's, and a host of new donors and volunteers joined the food team. In addition to USDA items and Blue Ridge Food Bank stocks, shelves filled with purchased staples. Friends of the pantry donated books for kids and grown-ups, winter coats and jackets, and children's gifts at Christmas.

Now boasting a commercial kitchen from the building's former life as the Blue Moon Restaurant, the pantry could offer irregular cooking classes for clients, taught by local chefs using ingredients normally stocked at the pantry. And Mimi put together casseroles, soups, puddings and stir fries with regular pantry stocks to offer lunch snacks for volunteers and introductions to new menu ideas for pantry shoppers. The pantry was now the beneficiary and dominating presence (after Santa!) in the town of Washington's Christmas parade, and community events, from Pen Druid Brewery's Yeaster to food drives at churches, service clubs and ball games, benefited the effort to feed the needy.

It wasn't all progress. But when obstacles arose, Mimi managed to surmount them, from the monumental to the miniscule.

At one extreme, there was Covid. The pantry couldn't close, not when the need was greater than ever, but people had to be safe. So masked customers checked off lists of available food, and while shoppers waited outside in their cars, masked volunteers filled boxes with their choices.

Neither could the epidemic cancel the annual benefit dinner that raises almost a third of the pantry's budget. So, Mimi turned the extravaganza into a drive-through gourmet take-out, with guests pausing to pose for portraits in dinner clothes under an elaborately decorated canopy. ➔

Everyday challenges

➔ At the other extreme were the everyday challenges. Mimi was at her welcoming best as comforter and problem solver. She knew every client's name and many of the hurdles they had to surmount. Before Covid, the pantry had traffic jams of older single patrons and at-home moms with babies and toddlers, who came early, happy to wait for one of the four shopping baskets when they had neighbors, friends and Mimi to talk with.

"What's up? What's wrong? What's going on?" she'd ask the regulars when she noticed slumped shoulders, tear tracks or another sign of sadness.

Lose a house? She knew of a potential rental.

Sick goat and no money for a vet? She tracked down home remedies online.

Busted refrigerator? She telephoned someone who'd mentioned a week earlier that they had a fridge to donate, AND she asked them to deliver.

No way to get to a doctor's office? She connected pantry people with Rapp at Home.

No way to pay the electric bill? She directed them to the Benevolent Fund.

But Mimi was more than a one-woman referral center for all kinds of help. She was often the first to hear of a cancer diagnosis, a death, a grievous hurt or a great loss. Then she'd find a quiet and private corner to listen and, if asked, to guide, but mostly, it was the listening that mattered.

All the while, growth to match the need continued. Freezers, refrigerators and a big deli case were installed, personal care, laundry and hygiene items were added, more hungry people found their way to the pantry, and when the rented quarters in Sperryville got tight and the owner wanted to sell the building, the search was on for permanent space, focusing on a more central location in or near the town of Washington. The pantry's board of directors looked at existing structures and land to build on, but found nothing that was appropriate, affordable and available. Then developer and philanthropist Chuck Akre proposed a mixed-use development, which was

Y'all Come!

An open-house style retirement party on Friday, July 14, at the Sperryville Fire Hall will give everyone the opportunity to say thank you to Mimi Forbes for making a difference. Friends, acquaintances and well-wishers, especially the pantry's patrons, volunteers and donors, are invited. Appropriately, the event includes food and fun. Festivities run from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., and everything is free, including dessert from the C&C Frozen Treats ice cream truck.

to include affordable housing, a small office building and a permanent home for the food pantry. After some give-and-take between county and town on zoning and services, Washington's Rush River Commons was approved, and construction is underway, with the completion of the new pantry home expected by late spring of 2024.

"It was time for me to retire and give a new manager a clear field to lead the pantry into the future," Mimi said. "I went into this knowing it was a part-time job and never imagining I would stay 14 years! At 75, I'm just tired," she acknowledged. "I want more time for myself, my family, my dogs, my garden, my house and my business. I have a profession, and I'm good at it," she explained. "I want to work at my own pace, on my own schedule.

"I've always loved to have dinner parties, and I've hosted them all over the world," Mimi continued. "I just love to feed people. This turned out to be the best thing I've ever done in my life, and it's hard to walk away, but at some point, you have to move on."

Laura Lucas, the assistant pantry manager, and Shauna Volmrich, the volunteer coordinator, will be running day-to-day operations for the foreseeable future. Forbes selected and trained them before her departure.

Daphne Hutchinson has been a pantry volunteer for 12 years and is a self-declared member of "Mimi's Minions," the name fondly given to Food Pantry volunteers.