Your dollars provided ‘the light in the tunnel’

For older adults on a fixed income, the realities of choosing between buying food or home goods are deeply felt. Just ask George Hill, who describes his retirement as “financially baffling.”

A native Washingtonian, and longtime District government employee, George spent most of his adult life working as a heavy equipment operator, engineer, and safety technician. In 2014, he retired—and discovered that this new stage of life would present many challenges. “It’s been difficult,” he says. “I have to make choices between food and toilet tissue.”

He turns to your generosity when times are tough.

George first connected with Iona’s Home Delivered Meals Manager Jakia Muhammad last year. He started receiving our meals, but to everyone’s disappointment, they upset his stomach. Iona didn’t give up on George. Instead, Jakia offered Iona’s Emergency Food Pantry, which your contributions keep stocked. “That meant so much,” says George, who now regularly receives canned vegetables, fruits, whole wheat pasta, and other healthy foods. Because of your gifts, it’s become a true safety net for older adults, like George, who are facing hunger.

Additionally, with your donation to Iona, you provide farm-fresh fruits and vegetables in a free Farmer’s Market at Regency House, the building where George lives.

For George, who follows a vegetarian diet as a tenant of his faith, the local greens, apples, and other produce have been life-saving. “To find out you were coming to my building with vegetables—that was a light in the tunnel,” he says. “Iona has been a blessing.”

Making it even easier for George to get support was Iona’s willingness to help. “Most seniors, like me, come from working backgrounds, being self-supported, and taking care of their families,” he says. “It’s not that easy to say, ‘Hey, I’m hungry. Can you give me something to eat?’ Pride gets in the way.”

But at Iona, George felt welcomed. “I felt respect from the staff,” he says. “I had told Jakia one time that I was reluctant to utilize the food pantry, and she said, ‘No, you don’t have to feel that way.’ There was an openness to want to help.”

When times are tough, George Hill knows he can turn to Iona’s Food Pantry, which your donations keep stocked. He’s pictured with Iona staffmember Jakia Muhammad.
You might be surprised to learn that in addition to Iona’s regular Home Delivered Meals Program, which is funded by your donations and support from the DC Office on Aging, your contributions also provide special holiday meals to your older neighbors on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day.

You can imagine just how meaningful a smiling face and hot meal over the holidays can be to an older adult who might otherwise be alone. In fact, as you likely know, more and more people are living longer without nearby family or friends.

These “elder orphans” never expected to be isolated, with no one to talk to during the day. And, the holidays often exaggerate these feelings of loneliness.

Fortunately, your generous donations—of time and money—remind them that neighbors like you care. When a friendly face arrives at their door, exchanges warm greetings, and delivers a fresh-cooked holiday meal, they know they still have a community.

With your support, nearly 90 dedicated volunteers prepped, packed, and delivered 363 hot meals this past Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

Prepared by the chef at St. Mary’s Court, a residence for older adults, the meals included oven roasted turkey, cornbread stuffing, garlic mashed potatoes, green beans with lemon zest, butternut squash, and pumpkin pie.

Our team heard so many messages of thanks throughout the holiday season. We wanted to share some notes of gratitude with you.

One client wrote to us, saying, “I was delighted to receive the surprise dinners on Thanksgiving. It was still hot, so I ‘dug in.’ The turkey was moist, tender, and tasty, and the veggies and sides were delicious. Just being remembered made the day special. Thank you.”

Another wrote, “In this season of giving, I am so grateful for Iona’s spirit of giving to us all year round.”

And plenty of others shared laughs, exchanged handshakes and hugs, and simply said, “thank you.”

We’d like to add to their gratitude by thanking YOU, our generous volunteers and donors, who made these services possible over the holiday season. Your caring provided a warm meal, sense of community, and joy, to our older neighbors.

Volunteers from a past Thanksgiving holiday prep and pack meals. This year, your donations provided 363 hot meals on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day.
You helped John find new possibilities

If you’re ever visiting Iona’s Wellness & Arts Center, you might just bump into John Diggs, 75. He’ll be the man with a big smile on his face welcoming visitors and telling everyone he meets, “I love Iona!”

Give John a moment, and you’ll hear just why he’s become one of our most vocal supporters. “Iona really makes you feel good,” he says. “I’ve been telling people on the street about it!”

A longtime Washingtonian, John devoted his life to working hard and supporting his family. Over the years, he shined shoes, trained and worked as a cook, worked as a security guard for DC government, served in Vietnam, and eventually even became a secret service agent for President George H. W. Bush (among a number of other eclectic jobs).

At Iona, he’s known for his positive and optimistic presence. But, that wasn’t always the case for John, who has dementia. Before he started attending the Wellness & Arts Center—which your donations help to sustain—John spent most of his days alone in his apartment. He’d call his niece, Debra Plummer, and son, Reggie, daily. “He was isolated, and would spend so much time thinking about his illness and what’s wrong in his life,” Debra says.

After a conversation with his doctor, John and his family agreed something needed to change. With his two sons—Reggie and Martin—and Debra, they visited several senior wellness centers in the area to find the best fit for John. He enrolled in Iona’s program in August 2018.

Today, John spends his Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Iona—exercising, making art, enjoying lively discussions, and more. Your contributions have made this program available to John, where he’s been able to make friends and learn new things—and remain independent at home.

Most noteworthy, you’ve transformed his outlook on life. “His mood is so much better,” says Debra. “Iona exposes him to exercise, drawing, and socializing. He sees more positivity in his life.”

John agrees, adding that he now has something to look forward to. “Coming here is motivating and uplifting,” he says. “If I didn’t go to church, I wish it was so I could come here on Sundays!”

Your gifts fund the programming Iona offers at the Wellness & Arts Center. There, we have musical performances, a vegetable garden, exercise classes, and more for participants to enjoy. At the same time, families gain peace of mind knowing their loved one is safe and social during the day.
Jennifer Disharoon: I introduced my friends and colleagues to Iona, and so can you

“Never in my wildest dreams could I have predicted that at age 45, I would be dealing with a caregiving crisis involving my mother. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened. My mother had suffered all her life from mental illness and other health concerns, which progressed as she aged. When I got the call that every child dreads, informing me that my mother was in the hospital and gravely ill, I was completely unprepared. If only I had known about Iona earlier! I could have saved myself a number of headaches and a great deal of confusion. Instead, I spent countless hours on the phone and in meetings with various agencies and institutions, trying to set my mother up in assisted living.

A VITAL COMMUNITY SERVICE
Since my own experience, I’ve made it my personal mission to help more people learn about this vital community service. I became an Iona donor and joined the Board two years ago. I also began volunteering with the weekend meal delivery program. For my birthday last year, I even hosted friends at a favorite restaurant for a special Iona-themed brunch!

SPREADING THE WORD WITH FRIENDS
You might be surprised to learn that anyone passionate about Iona’s mission can host one of these gatherings, which Iona calls a “Heart of Iona Tour.”

During my brunch, Iona’s Executive Director Sally White and Deputy Director Susan Messina shared inspiring and relatable stories about Iona’s work (they did not ask my friends for any donation).

My friends were surprised to hear all that Iona has to offer! Many even told me later that while they don’t need Iona’s services right now, they might one day. It was a relief for them to know that Iona exists. Since then, some of my friends have joined me and volunteered their time with Iona too.

HELPING OTHERS FIND WHAT THEY NEED
My birthday brunch was so successful that I decided to do it again with colleagues. This time, Iona staff joined me at my office for a one-hour conversation about Iona’s impact. I invited coworkers who I knew were going through challenges with their aging parents.

After the conversation, one of my colleagues called Iona’s Helpline and was able to get good information from a social worker about next steps.

I feel proud to know that these short events have helped spread the word and build awareness about Iona. I have introduced my friends and colleagues to a new resource that might one day spare them the challenges I faced with my mother.

HOST A HEART OF IONA TOUR!
If, like Jennifer, you want to help get the word out about Iona to your friends, neighbors, colleagues, congregation, or other people in your life, please consider hosting your own Heart of Iona Tour.

Tours can occur at Iona, in your office, at your home, or elsewhere. Iona is flexible with timing. It’s a fun and informative hour!

LEARN MORE ABOUT TOURS
If you’d like to learn more about hosting a Heart of Iona Tour, please contact Rosie Aquila at (202) 895-9423 or email raquila@iona.org. We thank you for your dedication to Iona’s mission of helping older adults and caregivers!
In 2018, 130 family caregivers felt relief knowing their loved one was in a safe and enriching environment during the day in Iona’s Wellness & Arts Center.
In 2018, 83 people with memory loss, intellectual disabilities, and other chronic challenges participated in Iona’s Wellness & Arts Center.

You ensure Iona can provide this weekday programming, which includes art therapy and health support.