

LUNCH BREAK LIFE SKILLS CENTER

MORE THAN A MEAL

Helping with life skills and other needs, Red Bank-based program creates hope for a better future.



Coach Kay Wiesenfeld meets with Life Skills Program participant Christine Myers for a one-on-one coaching session at the Lunch Break Life Skills Center in Shrewsbury.

For some, finding a job was hard enough before the pandemic. They faced hurdles like not having a license, a proper education or a home address. “Sometimes these obstacles are huge,” says Mary Ann LaSardo, operations manager at the Lunch Break Life Skills Center in Shrewsbury.

Fortunately, LaSardo and her staff and volunteers at the Life Skills Center are there to help.

LaSardo joined Lunch Break after retiring as the vice president of customer care for Cablevision in New Jersey. “In my retirement, I wanted to get involved in the nonprofit world,” she explains. She uses her business acumen to help put those who need help on the path to self-sufficiency.

At the Life Skills Center, coaches conduct one-on-one sessions with participants, helping them with résumés, GED prep and whatever else they might need.

Life Skills Program coaching sessions were meant to take

MISSION

To provide food, clothing, life skills and fellowship to those in need in Monmouth County and beyond.

FOUNDED

In 1983 by Norma Todd.

HOW TO HELP

For volunteer opportunities, contact Angela Jackson at ajackson@lunchbreak.org or call 732-747-8577, ext. 3108.

EVENT

October 15: Lunch Break’s annual Fall Gala at the Count Basie Center for the Arts in Red Bank. Jon Stewart to host.

LEARN MORE

Visit lunchbreak.org; call 732-385-3971; or e-mail info@lunchbreak.org.

place in person—until the pandemic hit, and the program went virtual. But that, says program director Sharda Jetwani Love, had a hidden benefit. The ESL program (English as a second language), for example, “yielded a lot more participants, because going virtual allowed the participants to not have to worry about day care or transportation.”

In fact, from February 2019 to last October, the overall number of participants in the Life Skills Program increased by about 80; more than 120 individuals are currently enrolled. Close to 50 participants have gained employment so far.

Keeping participants connected during the pandemic proved challenging. “That digital divide, it’s so real,” says LaSardo. “We are working very hard now to make sure that our participants have good, usable technology in their homes.”

The Life Skills Program is one of several services Lunch Break provides. Founded by lifelong humanitarian Norma Todd in 1983, Lunch Break’s first mission was to fight food insecurity in Red Bank and the surrounding area. “They wanted to feed people, to have a place where people come to have a nice, hot meal,” says Gwendolyn Love, who assumed the role of executive director after Todd’s death in 2008.

Lunch Break continued to grow from there. “They realized it was bigger than just people needing food,” says Love.

Today, Lunch Break offers more than 22 programs, made possible by more than 2,000 volunteers and the generosity of donors. “We have programs that help with food, clothing, backpacks, children’s toys—all those things we call, ‘help for today,’” says Love. “But we also have help for tomorrow, which is our Life Skills Center. That’s where we feel that hope for tomorrow really exists.”

—Andrew Farinaccio