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*'It's almost like a little Christmas present, going through your bag . . . I was in need of some help and they certainly were there.'*

MARTHA TONER, 55

*A Community Servings meals recipient recovering from radiation treatment*

## They bring the chicken soup, or 'sopa'

Agency delivers custom-cooked meals to the sick

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Martha Toner, 55, of Boston, was diagnosed with breast cancer approximately one year ago, and although she didn't have to go through chemotherapy, she did have to endure surgery and radiation treatments at Massachusetts General Hospital.

There, Toner became a part of a cutting-edge regimen and was monitored throughout "grueling," and accelerated, radiation treatments twice a day, with only six hours in between, for approximately two weeks.

When Toner completed treatment in February, she was unprepared for the debilitating aftereffects. So her oncology social worker at MGH, Catherine Carlo, signed her up for **Community Servings**.

Toner was isolated by pain and too ill to cook for herself. She almost stopped eating all together, until there came a knock on her door.

She was greeted every week by a driver from Community Servings, a Roxbury-based nonprofit organization that delivers nutritious and tasty meals, at no cost, to people who are too sick to cook for themselves.

"I didn't expect the aftereffects," Toner said. "It worked out, but I barely remember" the first two months after the treatment. "I felt like there were flames shooting out of my head. I was on fire, literally . . . I couldn't tolerate the pain medication; at one point I couldn't tolerate a lot of food."

Toner began by looking through the big bags of food dropped off by the Community Servings drivers. She found fresh salads, soups, fruit, milk, cereal, fish, chicken, and even dessert. It was so enticing that she finally got her appetite back. "I was having a great time with that sweet tooth," she said with a laugh. "It's almost like a little Christmas present, going through your bag . . . I was in need of some help and they certainly were there."

Community Servings, run from offices on Magazine Street in Roxbury, serves culturally appropriate cuisine to a primarily African-American and Latino population.

Its chefs, who come from the same neighborhoods they serve, cook over 22 special diet-centered meals from scratch. Its delivery drivers drop off the meals, which specifically cater to the individual and his or her ailment. The nonprofit was founded in Dorchester in 1990 to serve HIV/AIDS patients. It has since expanded to include all debilitating illnesses, in a coverage area stretching from Brockton to Lynn. In 16 years, Community Servings says, it has never missed a delivery.

The group has approximately 650 clients throughout Greater Boston. When it began in Dorchester, it was minimally staffed, relying mostly on volunteers and fund-raising to survive. In those days, its chefs were making 30 meals per day.

Since then, it's grown to 30 paid employees, with 800 volunteers helping each month. It serves 1,300 meals per day and has an annual operating budget of \$2.8 million. However, the bigger Community Servings gets, the more people it serves, and it's about to expand again.

On Oct. 10, it will break ground for a bigger building in Jamaica Plain, across from the Stony

Brook T stop. Guests will include Mayor Thomas Menino.

"The first thing we do is to start a menu that is nutritionally appropriate for people that are critically ill," said Cambridge native David Waters, the agency's 47-year-old director. "That involves working with doctors and nurses and our own registered dietitian around what's an appropriate diet for somebody who is going through chemotherapy because of breast cancer, or is on a variety of medications for HIV or AIDS, or any of the other 20 different diseases that we serve clients with every day."

Waters added that the meals have to be good, because people are often so nauseated from their medications that they lose the will to eat.

As for Toner, she is still suffering, and has not been able to return to her job as a private personal chef. She hopes that when she goes in for her next round of tests, she will be told that she is cancer-free. For now, she is out of work, and collecting disability. But she says she looks forward to the meals.

"It's a miracle to pull off what we do every single day," Waters said. "We never miss a day."