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The Joy Bus Diner opens to continue spreading gourmet meals to people in need.

Five years ago, Jennifer Caraway began bringing her friend Joy, who was dying of cancer, healthy meals and visiting with her. She would ditch work on Fridays to make meals, utilizing her background in food to give Joy something to look forward to. However, she had no idea how much of a need she could fill for so many people. "I was blown away by the number of people who don't have family or don't have friends or don't have a church," she says. "It's heartbreaking."

The Joy Bus was founded to "relieve the daily struggles of homebound cancer patients with a fresh chef-inspired meal and a friendly face," according to its mission statement. When the organization started, it was just Caraway and two other people—one in Mesa and one in Buckeye—operating Joy Bus. They could service only a limited number of people with their small staff, but the organization has since grown, and the Joy Bus is now able to serve 50 families.

The recently-opened Joy Bus Diner, a brick-and-mortar restaurant located in Phoenix at Shea Boulevard and the 51, is half-staffed with volunteer cooks, hosts and servers (the other half are paid employees), and all of its profits fund the Joy Bus' operations. One of its most prominent features, besides its gourmet-inspired menu, is the legacy wall, for which patrons can buy legacy tiles to commemorate someone they have lost to cancer or someone who has beaten it. The restaurant was designed and built entirely with donated time, resources and energy, from the floors to the architecture to the countertops to the funds needed to secure the location.

"I wanted [the meals] to be like a treat," Caraway says. "I don't want it to be stuff that gives you cancer, so it's nothing from a can or a box." Cancer patients are often on strict diets, and it's important that they get healthy, fresh meals, which make up the meals Caraway strives to deliver via Joy Bus. It's so strict that only about five menu items at the diner are deemed "fit" for patients, but the food they serve is still fresh. "It's all real food," she says. "Even in the diner we don't have boxes or packages; it's all real food."

Caraway is grateful for the huge amount of support and growth the Joy Bus has seen over the last few years, but she's not ready to slow down yet. "I wish I could sit down and relax and realize where we've come from, but I'm already in my head planning the next four locations," Caraway says.

She's always looking for more people to donate their time and money to her cause. While manpower is always appreciated, she says that monetary donations are important because of the demanding prices of organic food and the amount of gas needed to get from person to person. "I'm really humbled that [people] appreciate the service, and I'm grateful that everyone is matched with a volunteer that's doing it out of the goodness of their heart," she says, and she hopes that with the community's help, the Joy Bus can soon be delivering all over the Valley.

To Learn More

The Joy Bus thejoybus.org.

The Joy Bus Diner thejoybusdiner.com.