
Feeding a Community



What does it mean to be hungry? In 2009, more than 49 million people in the United States—including 16.7 million children—lived in households that experienced hunger or the risk of hunger, as reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In simple terms, more than one in seven households went hungry or teetered at the brink. Our economic recession has only made things worse: The nonprofit organization Feeding America conducted an economic impact survey of the nation's food bank network and found an average 30% increase in requests for food in 2009, mostly attributed to rising unemployment.

For those who have a well-stocked fridge and pantry, it may be convenient to think of people who depend on

food banks as “them.” We tell ourselves that somehow those who have found themselves on the unfavorable side of this economic maelstrom—or life in general—live in a different world. But of course, they don't. People who experience hunger are our friends and neighbors, quite literally. The Greater Boston Food Bank reports that more than a third of the households served in eastern Massachusetts have one or more working adults—and more than two thirds are registered voters. Seventy-three percent have a place to live. People who experience hunger cannot be written off as the flotsam and jetsam of society.



Board members Brenna Mayer (left) and Lorin Hill (center) with other volunteers from Lawrence Academy and First Parish Church washing dishes at the first Groton Community Dinner held in May 2009.



Volunteers chat after assembling salads.

While many among us struggle to feed themselves and their children, it is perhaps ironic that the United States is also experiencing an epidemic of obesity. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that fully two thirds of the U.S. population is overweight or obese. One third of Americans meet the criteria for clinical obesity.

Many among us are underfed, and many among us are overfed. Still, we eat, and overeat. With the prevalence of eating beyond what is necessary or healthy, clearly there are different kinds of hunger—not all of which can be described as hunger due to scarcity of food. Perhaps we are hungry because we are not eating the foods that truly sustain our bodies with healthful nutrients; perhaps we eat to fill a hunger that cannot be satiated through high-speed living or the centrifugal force of our digital world, which can drive us into a place of isolation that is not always easy to recognize.

The relationships between hunger, food, and personal and community well-being are complex issues that raise a spectrum of questions. In late 2008, a handful of individuals in Groton, Massachusetts, were thinking about the different kinds of hunger—thinking similar thoughts, and asking similar questions, separately. What if we could feed hungry people? What if we could help lonely people feel more included? How can we start talking to one another and build a real community? How are we going to take care of each other?

One of those people was Groton resident Brenna Mayer. For many months, Mayer had been thinking about doing more to build community while helping those who needed help. “I was hearing lots of things on the news that were stressing me out, and I wasn’t taking action. I wasn’t making a positive difference,” Mayer recalls. She was deeply motivated by Martin Luther King Jr.’s assertion that “anybody can be great, because anybody can serve.”

Mayer knew she wanted to do something, but she wasn’t sure what to do, or how to get started. Ultimately, it was Mayer’s children who clarified her focus. “I was seeing a real imbalance and a lack of perspective in my children in understanding how fortunate we are to have food on the table every night. When you get into the school system as a parent, you see that it isn’t that way for everyone. We have so much in this town and in this country that no one should have to struggle for food. You see people in Haiti and Africa on the news but we have really poor, hungry people right here. They just aren’t as visible to us. They’re easier to ignore.”

Informally, Mayer shared her thoughts with Jane Metzger, a Groton resident who shares Mayer’s interest in community building—and food. “We talked about feeding people,” Mayer says. “For people like us who love food and cooking, it’s about expressing love through food. It seemed like a natural thing to do.”

Enter Reverend Elea Kemler, minister of the First Parish Church of Groton Unitarian Universalist. Mayer talked to Kemler about her desire to start making a difference, perhaps through feeding the community. “For two years, people had been asking me, ‘Why aren’t we feeding

people in this town?" Kemler recalls. Groton resident Brad Bigelow was one of those congregants. He went to Kemler with his concerns about the worsening economic situation. "Brad was despondent about the economy," Kemler says. "He knew that the recession was going to impact people—local people—and that we needed to be prepared. Brad was thinking big, and he wanted to create a full-scale community dinner." Kate McNierney, experienced in feeding the hungry, had also spoken to Kemler about addressing this issue.

"I knew it was time to bring people together and make a plan," Kemler says. "We sent e-mails out to 15 or 20 people and we all got together for a brainstorming session." That session took place in February 2009 and produced a steering committee. Among the original committee members were Reverend Jamie Green of Christian Union Church, Andrea Mason, Lorin Hill, Jane Metzger, Doris and Allen King, and Tucker Smith.

From the outset, the group was clear that they wanted to offer something a little different than what might be considered typical for a community dinner. "We wanted something more than a soup kitchen," Kemler recalls. "We wanted something that spoke to community and feeding people in a broad sense, not only feeding people who needed food. We wanted to serve food that tasted wonderful and was highly nutritious. And we wanted a celebratory atmosphere." The dinners would include table service, fresh flowers, cloth napkins, and live music performed by local musicians. There would always be a vegetarian option. This would be a place where a teenager who came with his or her family would not be fearful of seeing a peer. There would be such a broad community presence that no labels would be attached to anyone's reason for attendance. Environmental responsibility and sustainability were also driving priorities from the outset: avoiding plastic and paper products; minimizing waste; and using seasonal and local products. By creatively bringing together different community groups and individuals to volunteer each month, the steering committee hoped to build connections among groups that might not otherwise meet or spend time together. This would be the very essence of community building.



Reverend Elea Kemler (center) chats with Debby Smith (left) and Tish Branigan before the dinner begins.



Guests making nametags as they arrive.

There was a lot of talking, a lot of researching, and a lot of planning. Where should the dinners be held? Kemler wasn't sure that First Parish was the right location due to the church's tiny kitchen, but a few of the church's leaders felt strongly that their facility was a good candidate and arranged for an existing internal fund to be used for renovating the First Parish kitchen, primarily in order to support the community dinner.

Group members attended community dinners throughout the region to find out firsthand what the experience was like and to interview the organizers. Interestingly, the steering committee's plan for an integrated, community-focused meal was rebuffed by the organizers of other dinners. "They told us it would never work," Mayer remembers. "They told us that we had to have real clarity. We

would either have to feed the poor and hungry or feed the community, but we'd have to be clear as to targeting one or the other." Kemler adds, "And they told us we would never be able to mix generations. They told us that if seniors were there, kids wouldn't come—and if kids were there, the seniors wouldn't come."

As it turned out, the naysayers were all wrong. The first dinner was held on May 29, 2009. Over 100 guests attended the event, far exceeding the steering committee's projections. Since then, the numbers have continued to grow. As of September 2010, Groton Community Dinners has produced 16 monthly dinners and has fed over 1,280 guests. Each monthly dinner is led by a different external hosting group or set of hosting groups. Hosting groups during the first year included the Groton Rotary Club, Groton Local, Groton Girl Scouts Troop 6061, Lawrence Academy, Groton Book Club, Community Chiropractic, the Groton School, Groton Jewish Community, Groton Wellness Spa, the Groton-Dunstable School District, Deluxe Corporation, the Boy Scouts, and several local churches. In total, 24 different hosting groups have supported Groton Community Dinners.

A collection of volunteers—first-timers as well as dedicated monthly helpers—promote and prepare for each dinner, staff the event, and clean up afterwards. In order to encourage community building and avoid burnout, jobs are shared and rotated from month to month.

On April 16, 2009, Groton Community Dinners hosted a special dinner to honor a group of visiting 9/11 first responders. The first responders came to Groton to present letters to Groton-Dunstable students for inclusion in *Pages for Peace*, on course to become the world's largest book. The well-attended dinner was an emotional event and exemplified Groton Community Dinners' ability to support the community.

What began as question marks in the minds of handful of local residents has now grown into a full-scale operation. On the last Friday of each month, a community gathers: the young, the old, families, single people, poor people, wealthy people—and everyone in between. There are no lines between who is hungry for food, who is hungry for company, who is hungry to serve, and who might be there for a bite of everything. The community has revealed itself to be just what the organizers had hoped for: a broad cross-section of demographics, ages, and histories. This success has surpassed the organizers' most optimistic hopes. As Kemler observes, "Making an idea come to life doesn't actually happen that often. This has been an amazing experience."

It's an experience that continues and develops. Mayer says, "We're still changing and growing. It's been a huge learning experience, a lot of successes, and really hard work that is all paying off. Everyone wants to look back after a year and say 'Look, we've come a long way.' And we have. But things are still evolving and there is still a lot to do. For me personally, I want to continue being a part of what we've created, but I want more people to participate. We've already had 350 volunteers, but I want even more people to get involved."

Groton Community Dinners cannot report on how many "hungry" people are being fed, as for obvious reasons, the group does not gather any statistics on who's hungry or poor. But it's clear from the community response that this organization is feeding people in many different and important ways. People are being fed in literal terms with healthy, nutritious food that is sourced and served sustainably. People are being fed with music and conversation. People are being fed by serving others. People are being fed by being part of a tangible community. In Mayer's words: "The need was there and the support was there. It was a huge confirmation that this is a community

that really wants to be together and do something good."

— Miranda Hersey Helin



Ready to get involved? Supporting your community through Groton Community Dinners is easy and fun. Find out more at www.grotoncommunitydinners.org or call Brenna Mayer at 978-448-0116.