

Martha's Table celebrates 20 years of feeding community



The smell of a late summer barbecue wafted through the church hall of St. Andrew's Presbyterian on Wednesday morning as the mighty volunteer team at Martha's Table served up their weekly community lunch.

Always an in-demand community service, last week's barbecue was special ? not only with the menu of freshly-grilled burgers, but in celebration of 20 years of community service.

Week in and year out, bar for a brief summer hiatus, Martha's Table welcomes everyone for a simple meal of a soup, sandwich and a sweet. It's a simple formula, but one that has warmed the stomachs and hearts of local families young and old. Initially an independent program of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church launched in 2005, it now operates under the auspices of Welcoming Arms, an ecumenical organization of six community churches that have come together to help address community needs.

When they first opened their doors for Martha's Table, they welcomed approximately 15 community members in their first week. By their second, they had 45 guests as word of the meal program made its way around Aurora.

Demand has only grown over the last two decades.

Our original philosophy was we just wanted to feed the community who needed something to eat, Martha's Table founder Helen Dawn, who passed away in 2018, told The Auroran on the organization's tenth anniversary. If you are hungry, you don't live well. If you don't live well, you don't add to the community. If we can feed you, then you'll add to this community of Aurora. Over the years it has gotten better because now there are more people interacting. A lot of them are seniors. The pension doesn't go as far as you think it does, especially if you are a single person. That is just where it is at ? we want to feed people.

The philosophy of Martha's Table has remained a constant since its inception, and these principles were reiterated at last week's 20th anniversary lunch.

We're just so incredibly grateful we can provide these lunches, said Sally Freitas, a social worker by trade who now leads Welcoming Arms. I just want to thank you volunteers from the bottom of my heart. Truthfully, our volunteers at Martha's Table are absolutely incredible. They are the same group that comes out week after week. The commitment is second to none, and they do all of this on a shoestring. Their budget is incredible, and we just are so thankful for that because it keeps it all sustainable.

We're so grateful that this provides an opportunity for so many to feel a part of the community, to meet friends, to socialize, and to receive support ? whether it is social support [or] spiritual support.

The celebratory meal not only included sizzling hamburgers, but a variety of side salads prepared and donated by York Region Food Network chef Maxine Knight, and a glittering cake courtesy of Longo's Aurora.

As guests tucked in, Freitas underscored to The Auroran the importance of weekly meal programs like Martha's Table.

"It brings all kinds of folks together," she said. "It provides a meeting place, somewhere that they can come and just meet with old friends, make some new friends, feel part of something, because I think a lot of times these folks may feel marginalized. Because it is a free meal and there are no barriers, we don't ask any questions, anybody who wants to come in can absolutely come in" and there's a lot of heart that goes into it.

"For some folks, this might be one of the best meals they're going to get in a couple of days. It's already prepared for them, it's prepared with love, and there's something to that! For us, it's just being able to meet that need" and you can see there is a need. To be able to meet that need and to be a part of that, I think is huge for us, and that was always our vision."

To help further that vision, Freitas said Welcoming Arms and the programs under its umbrella are always looking for donations — monetary and otherwise. Happily, they have a strong team of volunteers, but, she adds, they are always looking for new people to join up.

"This team is tight and they've been the same team for years and they're a well-oiled machine, but obviously all of us are not getting any younger! When someone decides it's no longer a good fit, I always love to see if I can bring in younger people, and even getting youth involved."

To see how you might be able to fit in, visit welcomingarms.ca.

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