

New Community Lunch Aims to Build a More Inclusive Community

By Bob Crane

One thing a lot of people learned from COVID is the importance of real human contact. While it was great to be able to carry on relationships through platforms like Zoom, most of us found that nothing can really substitute for the depth that meeting face-to-face provides. Recognizing that there may be many in our community who feel a need for social contact, a group of volunteers initiated a weekly community meal which began as a morning brunch in December, moving to early afternoons at the beginning of this year.

The Community Lunch is a friendly gathering in the lower hall of the James Bay United Church on Thursday afternoons, open to everyone to come and enjoy a delicious lunch and conversation with their neighbours. We are lucky to have the services of a professional chef and former restaurant owner. John trained with Fairmont Hotels and has extensive experience in the restaurant industry. Each week he serves up wonderful soups, home-made biscuits and hot dishes. Another member of our group, Ceridwen, has operated a bakery and managed a farmers market in Nanaimo, and has experience working in community kitchens and other humanitarian service. We try to have veg and non-veg options every time. We have takeout containers for those who prefer that option and we've also started having a selection of fresh and packaged food available for people to take away.

The lunch is a way to bring everyone from the community together to break down barriers and share what we have in common. We're making a



special effort to include our unhoused neighbours, providing a warm place to share a good meal and socialize. We're also trying to reach out to others who are living alone and may feel isolated from others in the community. But all of us, whether we feel isolated or not, benefit from getting together and socializing with others. And we really feel that has been reflected in the community. A call-out for volunteers on Facebook, James Bay Local Group resulted in our being inundated with about 35 people eager to help in various ways.

There is scientific research showing that social interactions with strangers can increase one's overall wellbeing, provide mental and physical health benefits and improve one's mood and outlook on life. These interactions fulfill a human need for belonging and connection with others. One study found that people who regularly talked to strangers were three times as happy as those who didn't. As volunteers, we can say we've felt these effects ourselves. We're having a great time working together and getting to know each other and our neighbours.

Our thanks to Joanne Keelan, who had the idea

and brought it all into reality. In talking about her inspiration, she passed on this quote which should resonate with all of us: "The opposite of burnout is not rest...but engagement, joy and meaning. If your work is in service of values you are passionate about, this fills the tank even through significant challenge." (Debra Gilin, Psychology Professor, Saint Mary's University, Halifax). She says, "With all the hard things going on in the world today, I was feeling down and losing hope. Starting the Community Lunch has reminded me that there are many good people who really care and we can support each other."

So please join us one of these Thursdays between 1:00 and 3:00 pm in the lower hall of James Bay United Church, 517 Michigan Street (entrance around the back). If you wish to donate, you can get a tax receipt for donations over \$20 to James Bay United Church - Community Lunch, or drop by for lunch where we have a donation pail.

Mailboxes



You missed one in the 100 block of Simcoe!
June P