



Everybody Eats! board chairman and volunteer cook Ron King prepares a recent meal in the basement kitchen of St. Dunstan's. The free community meal is pick-up only right now, every Monday from 2:30 to 4 p.m. ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY ANNE BERLEANT

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Demand for community meals surged in 2020

June 9, 2021 by Anne Berleant on News



ELLSWORTH — The prep work was well under way at 7:30 on a recent Monday morning, as Ron King chopped the ends off Brussels sprouts in the St. Dunstan's basement kitchen. The roasted sprouts are a favorite at Everybody Eats!, which serves a free community meal each Monday afternoon from 2:30-4 at the State Street church. But, of course, the work begins

much earlier for the day's featured main dish — a turkey-and-veg strata, served with rolls and dessert.

Operated under the umbrella of Downeast Community Partners, Everybody Eats! began 13 years ago with an ad that basically said, Let's talk about food. "So, I came in the door," King recalled. A farmer by birthright and inclination, King serves as the Everybody Eats! board chairman and also sits on the DECP board.

"Being a farmer, I had an idea of how to cut up a pig," he said. This comes in handy when the program is handed a couple half pigs, as has happened. Large food donations like that are stored in a freezer at Maine Shellfish Co. on Water Street, for which King and the rest of the Everybody Eats! team is grateful, he said.

Every donation counts in a program that served a healthy and hearty meal to 5,261 patrons in 2020 — a 44 percent increase from the preceding year. Also increased in 2020 were the costs, as \$6,000 more was spent on to-go supplies. Earlier in the pandemic, Friends in Action volunteers took on the deliveries; now, the ready-to-eat meals are picked up at St. Dunstan's.



Everybody Eats! volunteers — aka the lunch ladies — package items for later pick up at St. Dunstan's. The group includes Melinda Klingerman, Carol Jordan, Moira Whalen, Trish Worthen, Barbara Clark, Fred Beyer and Raina Sciocchettinni. ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY ANNE BERLEANT



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“It was a big challenge in the beginning,” King said of the shift to takeout. He noted that while food and feeding is the main aim of the program, it is nearly matched by the desire to bring community together over a shared meal.

“I’ve always been a great believer in [the idea that] eating together is a positive thing,” King said. “Getting together disenfranchised folks, and then they become the norm, and then they take care of each other is such a powerful experience.”

At the pandemic height, Everybody Eats! was delivering 170 meals. Now, that number has fallen to about 120 per week, King said, still a jump from pre-COVID times.

“I’m incredibly grateful with the outpouring of help and money we got during the COVID thing,” King said. This included federal money but also funding from Maine Community Foundation, which called up and asked if the program needed help.

Everybody Eats! is funded through a variety of means, including foundations, individual donations and grants. King also visits Healthy Acadia next door during its gleaning initiatives to raid the refrigerator and receives “tons of stuff” from the Hancock County Extension community gardens at Woodlawn and from King Hill Farm in Penobscot, where King formerly farmed and still resides, with younger farmers now tilling the fields. The city of Ellsworth donates funds each year, as does the St. Dunstan’s membership.

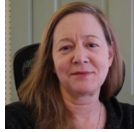
Much of the meal ingredients come from Hannaford, where King stops by to pick up produce, desserts and rolls that are at their sell date. Often deli meat and items are available, which often get packed as extras in take-out boxes. Proteins are purchased from Good Shepherd Food Bank. And a team of volunteers, coordinated by Tracy Shaffer, steps in each week to individually package the items and then put together each individual box to hand to diners.

King shared that the first meal he cooked for Everybody Eats! was vegetarian lasagna. One of his favorites to make, though, is Frito pie, he said. “Some beans, some rice, some chicken or hamburger [for the chili], then cover with Fritos and cheese.”

The Monday afternoon meals are still only for pick-up, but King said the board is discussing shifting back to a true community meal while possibly continuing the take-out option.

“Can we do both at the same time?” King wondered. Mid- to late summer would be that time frame. “That’s sort of our goal.”

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Anne Berleant

Reporter at The Ellsworth American

News Reporter Anne Berleant covers news and features in Ellsworth, Mariaville, Otis, Amherst, Aurora, Great Pond and Osborn. When not reporting, find her hiking local trails, reading or watching professional tennis. Email her at aberleant@ellsworthamerican.com.

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