

Healthy meals for the valley's hungry

Mountain Roots launches supper program

Holly Conn

Special to the Times

An addition to the sign at the front of Garlic Mike's reads "Open for Take Out" in 14-inch letters and from the front, the windows are dark and the restaurant looks closed. But inside, the team was busy on Monday preparing enough roasted garlic chicken, potatoes and vegetables to feed 300 people. And at the back door on Tuesday, Sasha Legere and Trisha Langenfeld of Mountain Roots are busy transferring 75 family suppers into the Mountain Roots van. By dinnertime, the savory meals will be delivered to the doorsteps of families throughout the Gunnison Valley.

Mountain Roots' new Family Supper Program was developed and launched within the span of 10 days in response to the impacts that novel coronavirus is having on families. Closures of businesses and schools combined with the community spread of COVID-19 has resulted in compounding challenges for families, and many are struggling to make ends meet and to put healthy food on the table.

"My husband lost his job and that was 70 percent of our monthly income ... since I took maternity leave this year my paycheck is a fraction of its normal amount," one family wrote. "We are extremely tight financially."

A single parent expressed their need after schools and daycares shut down, being unable to go to the store.

With the Mountain Roots Family Supper Program, near-

FAMILY SUPPER PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

- Nourishing meals sized for family of four
- Sliding scale costs from \$0-\$5 per person
- Suppers prepared by local restaurants and Mountain Roots kitchen
- Home delivery Tuesdays and Fridays
- Sign up with a simple google form www.mountain-rootsfoodproject.org

ly 100 families will receive a healthy supper, sized for a family of four, on Tuesdays and Fridays. To reduce the risk of community spread, Mountain Roots offers home delivery. This week's meals are prepared by Mario's, Garlic Mike's, the Divvy and the Mountain Roots kitchen. Later weeks will include Tully's, the Firebrand, Gunnison Vitamin & Health Food Store, and others. All agreed to "repurpose" their talent and their kitchens to create healthy family-style meals for emergency food relief during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Combined effort

When the pandemic hit, Mountain Roots stepped up to the front lines of the emergency food response, providing staff and AmeriCorps members to fill vacancies left when more than half of the Gunnison Country Food Pantry's regular volunteers — all seniors — stepped back to reduce their risk of exposure. When Crested Butte Mountain Resort and the majority of restaurants closed, Mountain Roots and the food pantry worked together to res-



Rachel Alter, kitchen creative, readies the food.

Courtesy

cue thousands of pounds of food and re-distribute to people in need. Next, Mountain Roots convened long-standing partners including the Gunnison Watershed REIJ School District, the food pantry, Public Health and others to quickly assess the overall food needs, identify resources, and to collaborate on rapid response funding requests.

With meals for seniors being delivered by the rec center, and breakfasts and lunches being delivered on the school bus route, we saw a gap for prepared suppers. At the same time, we saw restaurants struggling to stay open and doing meager take-out businesses. The supper program matches the need with the resources, and everyone wins.

Legere, the Farm to School program director at Mountain Roots, played a key part in creating the program.

"For Mountain Roots, this fits right into our mission of strengthening our community food system," Legere said. "Eating is a basic need, and so many families are struggling right now. Delivering healthy meals takes some of the pressure off, it helps to make ends

meet."

Legere fields requests from families, places orders with restaurants and coordinates logistics for pickup and delivery with her team of three Mountain Roots AmeriCorps members. "Community members and businesses are reaching out, stepping up and taking action to make sure families are fed with nourishing, healthy food. It is really amazing."

A benefit to business

Families can request meals through a simple Google form found on the homepage of the Mountain Roots website. With a small grant from the Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley and several donations from community members, any family in need can get a prepared healthy supper for \$5 or less per person. Restaurants are paid a fair price for each meal, which helps them recover revenues they have lost due to closure.

"I'm doing everything I can to keep my business alive," says David Wilkins, owner of The Divvy in Mt. Crested Butte. "This helps my business use inventory that we would not otherwise have been able to


use because of the shutdown. But the best thing is how many people we are going to be able to feed. I'm glad I get to help the cause."

Mountain Roots wants to reach as many people as possible, for as long as the need persists. We know of 400 families that would like to receive meals, if we had the funding. And we're looking at a month or two before things stabilize.


Mountain Roots currently has funding for one week of the program for 100 families, and has applied for additional rapid response funding to expand and continue. The organization is also accepting donations on their website.

As the last supper box is loaded into the van, Chef Michael Busse of Garlic Mike's flashes a big smile and says, "If it's love you are looking to spread, we have a lot of it and we are glad to help out!"

(Holly Conn is the executive director of Mountain Roots, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to cultivate a resilient and healthy food system in the Gunnison Valley. She is a regular contributor to Gunnison Country Publications.)



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