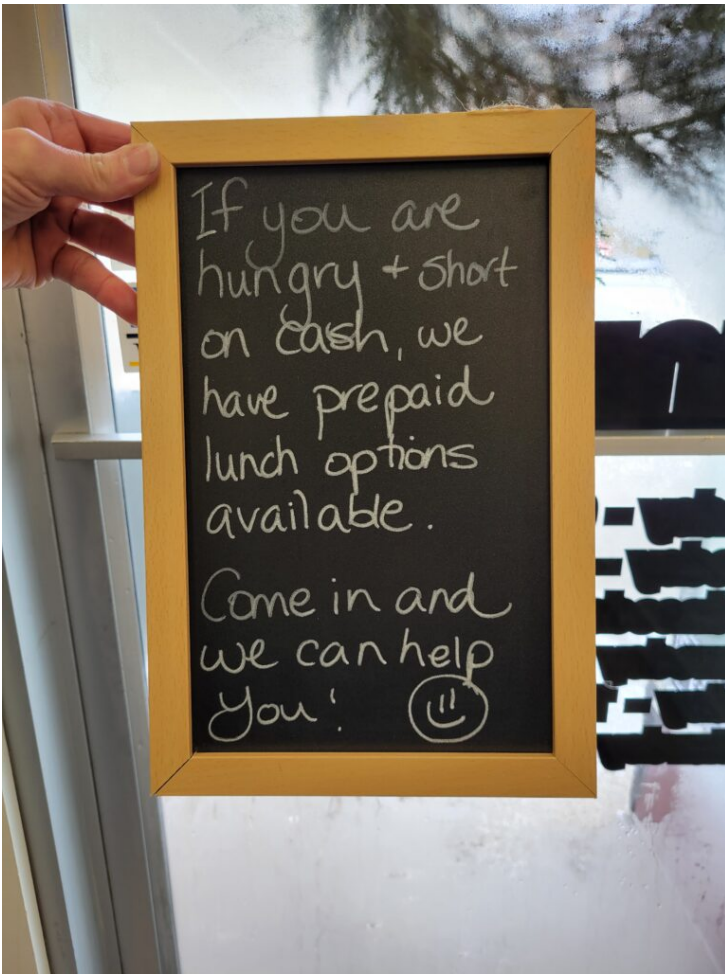


Eat it forward initiative offers people more than food



By Bill Kilpatrick

When Bancroft This Week first reported on the 'Eat it Forward' social justice initiative a little over a month ago it was under 48 hours old and the response from the community was overwhelming for the businesses that were taking part, those being, Just for the Halibut, McG's Cakes on Main, and the Coe Hill Café. Bancroft This Week decided to follow up with those business to see how the initiative went over the holidays, how it was going currently and to see if other businesses were now taking part. Eat it Forward, for those who are hearing this term for the first time, began early in December when Natasha and Val Alves read about The Nelson Street Pub in Pembroke who was allowing customers to pre-purchase meals for those who needed them. Customers would simply purchase a meal from the menu, a receipt would be created and placed on a board and customers would simply take that receipt up to the counter and receive that meal, no questions asked. 'The outpouring as been amazing,' said Natasha, adding that, 'The cool thing is that the initiative started with us and then the community started coming in [to support the initiative] and because we're Bancroft and people use Bancroft as a stopping point from other regions [including] tourists they see it and they're like 'Hey, [this is a great idea],' so now we have external funds coming in to support our community. Then they tell other people and now we have people from five hours away donating money. We have had people who moved out of the community a few years back call and say, 'Hey I heard you were doing this,' and putting their money back into their home community. It's wild and amazing and beautiful.' When Eat It Forward began many people thought that the program would only be for the unhoused community, explained Natasha, and there was also concern that the program would be abused, but neither of these assumptions have been accurate, in fact, the program provides more than just food, but a sense of normalcy and socialization from the all too often isolating effects of poverty. 'It [abuse] hasn't happened,' said Natasha, 'We've had single people come in, we've had young families come in who could

not afford to feed their whole family and then they see the board and get excited. We've had single moms with their kids come in and we have another gentleman who comes in who's like, 'Hey, thank you [for doing this] because it's hard times right now and we're struggling and it's really nice to just be able to have a treat once and a while.' Our message is always the same, come back we're happy to feed you.' The Just for the Halibut's Eat It Forward board was overflowing with some 60 receipts and Val estimated that they have received over \$1,500 in donations since the beginning of December. While the interview was taking place a member of the Canadian Armed Forces came in and used a chit from the board. The member who did not want to be named said, 'I'm struggling, [and] sometimes when you're in the military you struggle, people don't see it [because] they think that you're well off. I really appreciate it [the program]. I try to leave tips when I can, until I back on my feet and one day I can donate and give back to the program too.'

Tracy McGibbon, owner and operator of McG's Cakes on Main, has had much the same experience as the Alves' since she began the program. McGibbon, who refers to the program as 'pay it forward compassion lunches,' has received over \$2,000 in donations, a portion of which went to a Christmas dinner that she hosted for 20 members of the unhoused community at the Bancroft Bible Chapel. For McGibbon the program is not just about feeding people, it's also about giving people their dignity back, 'When members of the unhoused community are in here they are treated just like everybody else and my customers treat them like everybody else, because they are the same,' said McGibbon. A post on her Facebook page stated that, 'Each lunch is purchased with love, prepared with love, and served to each guest with love,' adding that, 'The support and generosity from our community (and even those who don't reside here but want to support this compassionate initiative) is incredible.' This was reflected by the fact that her receipt board has remained full every single day since she began the initiative. In terms of abusing the program McGibbon had this to say, 'They are not abusing it and they are super, super appreciative of it. There's a couple we feed almost every day. They are here for their snack and their lunch and that's fine. That's what it's for.' McGibbon is predominantly serving members of the unhoused community, no doubt because of her location, but she has also had other people accessing the program, 'There's high school kids and there's seniors, but mostly members of the unhoused community,' said McGibbon, who also wants to remind everyone that 'The winter months are cold and hard, with that we are providing many lunches to our friends in need. This is a good time to stop in [and] prepay for a lunch, hot drink or a treat.'

Kaitlyn Peckford, the owner of the Coe Hill Café, plans to keep the initiative going all year long, 'It's honestly going so much better that I could have imagined,' stated Peckford in an email to Bancroft This Week, adding that 'We have a wall filled with paid receipts that have been used and replaced by the community.' In fact, Peckford has people 'on reserve' who are willing to donate if they start running low on donations and recently they had a local couple donate \$100 in meals, 'It's just amazing to see,' said Peckford who shares both McGibbon's and the Alves' enthusiasm for compassionate generosity, 'because,' as Peckford stated, 'hunger struggles or the desire to feel normal and go out for a meal at a time when money is hard to come by doesn't just happen during the holidays.' At a time when so many people are struggling just to get by Peckford says that herself and her staff 'are so grateful to be able to provide this to our community.'

Alice Martin, who owns Alice's Pantry at 99 Hastings Street North, was happy to hop on board to support the initiative as well, 'We put something on Facebook to let people know that we are willing to help with it,' said Martin, who, because of the nature of her business, given she has no menu and the meals and prices change constantly, has decided not to use a board with receipts, but instead accumulates donations and uses them to help people pay for items they may need. She has been providing not only hot meals, but coffee, or even a bag of sweet treats because she wants to make sure that everyone gets what they want or need at the time. Martin also wants to highlight that her program is not just for those who are unhoused, 'There are so many people who can rarely buy themselves anything special or even something for take-out,' said Martin, 'If people just need a hot meal and they don't have the money to buy it,' they can come in and get one as well, she said. 'It's not just for people who are unhoused,' stated Martin, adding that any people who have used the program have been very appreciative. Joe Kidman is one of those people. Kidman has been living as a member of the unhoused community in Bancroft for the last three years and has eaten at both Just for the Halibut and McG's Cakes on Main, where he was interviewed for this story. When Kidman first found out about the program and went to Just for the Halibut he told Alves, 'I can't believe that you're doing this, this is awesome,' and now he makes sure that everyone knows about this program. 'This town has some of the best networks for homeless people to eat and survive,' said Kidman, 'You don't have to go dumpster diving and you don't have to eat second-hand food.' Kidman could not say enough about McGibbon's cupcakes that have become quite popular among all her customers. As Kidman was being interviewed another member of the unhoused community came into the store, walked over to the board, picked a meal and went up and got it. There was no shame, but a sense of pride and appreciation. When Kidman was asked what the program means to him he said, 'It means the world to me that this little community can come together and do something like this for us,' adding 'I'm just beside myself about the way the world has changed in the last little bit for myself.' Kidman was referring to the fact that he was recently offered a job and as a result he tried to quit using substances cold turkey, but his body could not take it and he ended up having a heart attack and now has problems with his kidneys and could be

facing dialysis. Despite his worry about his health problems Kidman vows to continue working and stay clean as long as he can adding that, 'I'm glad that there's people like Tracy, Val, Natasha, and Alice [and Kaitlyn] who take care of people like me.' Kidman finished the interview with this message for people, 'Please don't judge people by who they are, ask them their story first, please [?] let's not judge people let's help people like this [by running a compassionate food program]. Anyone who would like to make a donation to these businesses can drop by in person, or donate by e-transfer to McG's Cakes on Main at bmcgibbon@live.ca, Just for the Halibut at eat@forhalibut.com or to the Coe Hill Café at coehillcafe@gmail.com. Alice's Pantry would prefer if people just donated cash in person if possible.