

Community Cafés Feed Body, Mind and Soul

By Mark Schwendau

July 25, 2021

ROCHELLE (Illinois): Most people are familiar with the concept of a soup kitchen, but community cafés are something different. Community cafés, or PWYW (Pay-What-You-Want) cafés, are a contemporary trend sweeping across the country. They provide people of various income levels access to healthy, affordable meals in a welcoming environment. Community cafés address issues of accessibility, affordability, availability and food waste, while increasing awareness of healthy eating habits.

The Kitchen Table at Rochelle, Illinois, has twice won recognition as “Community Cafe of the Year” by the national organization ‘One World Everybody Eats (OWEE) for its policy of allowing diners to pay what they can. One World Everybody Eats is a network of independent nonprofit cafes.

“One World Everybody Eats Documentary” – Tanner Presswod

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5GeiwEqQRU>

The employees of The Kitchen Table are volunteers and the customers set the menu price. Volunteers also act as servers taking orders and delivering meals to tables. Some customers pay just a dollar while others pay \$10 or more. But no one knows what’s paid by others. The bills for the meals have no amount posted on them for the point-of-sale (POS) computer system.

Community cafés typically offer one set meal with no set price. A free-will donation is requested instead of a bill with an itemized account of what was had. Volunteers and donations are the backbone of the community café model. Those diners who are well-off come to dine with those who are less fortunate making for a kind of pay-it-forward moment in time.

The community café concept began in 1984 in Malaysia at a volunteer-run Indian vegetarian restaurant called Annalakshmi (Anna – food/Lakshmi – Hindu goddess of good fortune). Its motto was, “Eat what you want, pay what you feel, allow everyone the opportunity to enjoy a delicious vegetarian meal with no worries of cost.” Utah resident Denise Cerreta opened a community café in America (One World Café) in 2003 in Salt Lake City. In 2006, she assisted Brad and Libby Birky in Denver, Colo., in opening S.A.M.E. (So All May Eat) community café.

Recently embracing this concept are the Panera Bread Company and rock star Jon Bon Jovi. Panera opened a community café in Boston, by way of the Panera Bread Foundation, while the Jon Bon Jovi Foundation operates the “JBK Soul Kitchen” in Red Bank, N.J. Both of these establishments were designed to address food insecurities and ensure that everyone has access to a nutritious and delicious warm meal at a time when one in six Americans now go hungry.

Following the Altruistic Science - People Who Live Selflessly are Happier and Live Longer!

“Why some people are more altruistic than others” - Ted Talks Abigail Marsh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uq-6T6TAu74&t=638s>

In Rochelle, Illinois, Carolyn and Grant Brown always had big hearts for those who lack necessities such as food, shelter and clothing. They were known for dipping into their savings to help others in their times of need. They have even, on occasion, had strangers over to their home to eat. Carolyn, an accountant and tax preparer, and Grant, an industrial maintenance mechanic, were just the right fit to heed the calling to begin a community café in north-central Illinois.

For many years, Carolyn has held an Illinois Food Service Sanitation Manager Certification and cooked for church and community events. People would often tell her, “Your cooking is so good, should have your own restaurant!” She became widely known for her jars of homemade salsa and other products. This Tennessee native easily recognized for a big heart and southern drawl rapidly found her way into many people’s hearts by way of their stomachs. She brings to the north the kind of southern hospitality that doesn’t allow anybody to leave the table wanting for more. Carolyn dreamt about the possibilities of transforming an abandoned Old Klondike Bar (former bar and grill supper club) into a community café every time she passed it on Illinois Route 38 just west of Rochelle.

“I would look at it all the time,” she says. “I asked Grant to go with me to look at it. He told me I was nuts. He said I didn’t realize what kind of work and money it would take to bring the building back up to code. I said we should at least go look and maybe we could get it cheap enough that it would make it easier to rehab.” Grant refused to entertain her curiosity.

But Carolyn proceeded anyway, and made an appointment on her own. When the day came, she convinced Grant to tag along.

“The day we looked at it in July 2012, we offered \$5,000,” she says. “The realtor thought that was pretty funny since they were asking \$58,000.”

The Browns left that day and figured the Klondike was not meant to be. Then, in January 2013, the realtor called to ask if they were still interested.

“I said ‘Sure, for \$5,000,’” says Carolyn.

The Browns negotiated the building and property for a little more than \$6,000 and closed the deal on February 19, 2013.

Where most would have seen the property as fit for leveling to the ground, Carolyn saw a vision of a future community café.

“We had to tear down the back two-thirds of the building, as it was beyond restoration, but that front part, which was the newest part, we just had to save it,” she says. “The actual front bar portion had such amazing character. The walls were varnished Cedar planks and so beautiful. I could envision how it would look with all the antiques I had collected.”

Carolyn began to attend summit meetings for the nonprofit One World Everybody Eats, a spinoff organization from the original One World Café. She took notes during lectures and seminars on how to start and operate a community café.

The Kitchen Table officially began operating in June 2016 after establishment of a board of trustees, incorporation as an IRS 501(c)(3) registered charity, and more than \$60,000 of the Brown's personal finances invested to open the doors. Since 2012, many others have joined in offering their own time, talents and monetary donations to make the vision of a local community café come true.

The Kitchen Table seats 36 at a time, but meals are also sent out to the Rochelle homeless shelter and women's center. Some meals can also be ordered for takeout at a set price. During special events, such as the Second Anniversary Celebration held June 30, 2018, many more people were served outside.

A recent addition of the Mike Rowe Pavilion now adds additional seating to the original building. Mike Rowe made an appearance and donated \$50,000 to add on to the facility after the Kitchen Table was nominated to receive Rowe's award.

"Returning the Favor" Features the Kitchen Table at Rochelle Season 3, Episode 18" – Mike Rowe

<https://www.facebook.com/ReturningTheFavor/videos/354587495453833/>

Besides providing nutritious, complete meals while protecting the dignity of the hungry, those involved with The Kitchen Table's inception noticed how the cafe brought people together for fellowship in community. This was a pleasant side effect to The Kitchen Table's mission, says Carolyn. In addition, people from the Ogle County court system have been able to complete community service hours at The Kitchen Table. Carolyn believes everybody deserves a second chance.

The Kitchen Table serves meals on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4:30-7:30 p.m. throughout most of the year, plus brunch the first Sunday of each month from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Menus are set monthly and are available at KitchenTableRochelle.org and social media pages. Meals cost around \$3 to prepare, but clientele are not informed of meal costs unless they ask, Carolyn says.

Board members have been touched by the generosity of those who have come forward to assist in their mission, Carolyn says. Serving teams have come forward from Rochelle Hospital, Monsanto Company, Holcomb Bank and several Kiwanis Key Clubs, among others. Tyson Foods, Hormel, Subway Restaurant, Monsanto Company and Del Monte are some companies that have made generous contributions of food and/or money to The Kitchen Table.

Carolyn reports that about 25 percent of people cannot afford to pay the cost of a meal, but 75 percent pay more than \$5. It costs around \$100 to \$200 to prepare a meal for 50 to 100 people for a normal night. Some meals, like BBQ ribs, cost more. Carolyn is known to stretch a dollar to make ends meet, while food donations from local suppliers help keep costs down.

Some highlights of The Kitchen Table were receiving two grant awards from the Rochelle Area Community Foundation (the latest one being \$1,500), receiving a grant award of \$2,500 from the Rochelle High School Interact Club, being featured on the front page of the Chicago Tribune on Thanksgiving Day, receiving 75 hams from Tyson Foods for the holidays, and, most recently, receiving a \$7,500 grant from the Monsanto Foundation. And, of course, the \$50,000 donation from Mike Rowe to allow The Kitchen Table to expand.

“Always remember that if you can dream it, it can be achieved,” Carolyn says. “It just takes work and perseverance. We can’t change the world, but we can help change our communities.”

The Kitchen Table in Rochelle serves meals on Tuesday and Thursday evenings throughout most of the year. There’s also a brunch available the first Sunday of each month from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. The monthly menu can be found on the home page of their website.

One World Everybody Eats Makes and Announcement!

“OWEE will participate in the third annual National Everybody Eats Week from August 22nd – August 28th, 2021. National Everybody Eats Week is a nationally coordinated campaign to help individuals understand the power they have to build community, ensure a table for everybody, and end hunger.

We want to encourage our nation to come together. Community Cafes have been building equitable communities for nearly 15 years. During this pandemic, our member cafes continued to meet the needs of the communities they serve; because the challenge and the goal is deeper than food.

We encourage all Americans to dine at a One World Everybody Eats café during National Everybody Eats Week.”

Readers can learn more about One World Everybody Eats at their website here,

<https://www.oneworldeverybodyeats.org/>

and more about The Kitchen Table at Rochelle here,

<https://www.kitchentablerochelle.org/>

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Mark Schwendau is a Christian conservative patriot and retired technology professor (CAD-CAM and web development) who prides himself on his critical thinking ability. Schwendau has had a long sideline of newspaper editorial writing where he used the byline, “- bringing little known facts to people who simply want to know the truth.” Mark is on alternative free speech social media platforms after lifetime bans from Facebook and Twitter and shadow bans from Instagram and Fox News commenting. His website is www.IDrawIWrite.Tech