

Good food really can be medicine: Healing Meals Community Project

By [Nicole Muller](#) | November 30, 2024



Healing Meals Community Project's staff and adult and student volunteers gather with the non-profit's founder and CEO Sarah Leathers (center in a navy jacket) before getting to work preparing and packing food for delivery to individuals and families going through and/or recovering from health crises. Photo by Nicole Muller

In the village of Weatogue, in Simsbury, magic happens inside a building that was once a golf clubhouse. “Balancing old-fashioned community values and recognition of the relationship between nutrition and healing, we support families facing a health crisis with healthy, organic meals,” says Sarah Leathers, founder and CEO of Healing Meals Community Project. The non-profit's mission is to nourish the community and empower tomorrow's leaders.

A mechanical engineer by schooling, Leathers says that following a major health crisis of her own in 2013, she attended the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York City to learn more about healing through healthy eating.

Six years earlier in 2007, Leathers' sister Cathryn Couch had founded the Ceres Community Project in Sebastopol, Calif., to teach young people to cook and eat healthy food, to provide meals to families and individuals facing serious illness and to educate people on the connection between food and health. "I had been watching what my sister was doing, and every time I turned around, someone I knew was diagnosed with cancer," Leathers says. "My sister had written a cookbook [*Nourishing Community: Healing Recipes Made with Love*], and I bought them by the case and delivered them to people. I wanted to offer the same opportunity in Connecticut, and a friend asked me what I was waiting for."

After agreeing to join Leathers' team, like-minded friends Ellen Palmer, Ellen Safino and Emily Deutsch accompanied Leathers to California for training at Ceres. By the spring of 2016, Healing Meals Community Project was launched. The non-profit is built on three principles: that nutrient-rich food is a necessary part of a person's overall well-being; that young people must be central participants in shaping our future; and that when individuals are linked to their community, they have a strong sense of connection.

"Cross-generational creativity and respect forms the foundation of our culture," says Leathers. "We have created a community here that nourishes each other with food, love and care, kindness and patience."

Healing Meals receives no state or federal funding. It is entirely funded by corporate sponsors, grants, foundations and individual donors.

The volunteers

Each afternoon at 3 pm, high school student volunteers and their adult mentors arrive at the facility to assist with cooking and to help package meals in insulated bags for delivery.

"Every shift starts with a circle of all staff and volunteers," Leathers says. "It's an opportunity to take a breath, to pause and remember why we are here. We might share a note from a client so that everyone knows that the work we do matters. We leave stresses behind, turn to the next person, and say something kind. That's a core component of who we are here. This is a joyful place, a safe place for teens to be, to feel safe and accepted while they're trying to figure out who they are and where they're heading in life."

Leathers has proudly watched as the young people form close bonds while developing their interpersonal communication and coping skills. "We're a youth development program, and many of our teen volunteers start when they're 13 or 14 and stay with us through their senior year," she says. After they have contributed 50 hours, the teens receive a blue Healing Meals apron, and after 100 hours, a chef coat. "These milestones provide a sense of pride in a safe environment where teens solve personal problems freely without repercussions. Someone having a bad day finds patience and understanding here."

The teens come from a variety of area high schools. “We don’t really recruit the kids,” Leathers says. “The kids recruit the kids. We have about 175 teen volunteers in all. We average 125 adult and teen volunteers per week, and about a third of them are kids.”

Each year, Leathers invites three or four teens to serve on her board of directors. “It gives them a stake in what we do, a voice, and insight into what happens in a business like this,” she says.

Adult volunteers, whom Leathers calls her Kindness Crew, also hail from area towns and travel up to 45 minutes to deliver meals to clients. Clients living a greater distance from Simsbury arrange for a friend or relative to pick up their weekly meals. “We’re lucky that our volunteers have so much passion for the people we serve,” Leathers says. “Some deliver to the same person or family for the entire three months of meals.” In extenuating circumstances, clients may request an extension of the Healing Meals services. Kindness Crew members also provide tips on nutrition and healthy eating when making the weekly delivery of four entrees, a soup or salad, and a quart of nourishing broth.

Healing Meals, Leathers says, could not function without its volunteers. “Fostering compassion and empowering youth and adult volunteers are important to our mission,” she adds. “Ours is a cross-generational program with no hierarchy. Executive Chef Joe [Bucholz] mops the floor with the kids. He and his assistants also teach them about nutrition and how to be safe in the kitchen while cooking.” Once a month, Healing Meals offers information sessions for new volunteers.

The clients

Healing Meals’ clients include individuals and their families across Connecticut who are facing or recovering from serious illnesses. When a health crisis such as cancer, stroke, or heart attack strikes, shopping for and preparing healthy meals is far from anyone’s mind. Yet research and practice show that this is exactly the time when good nutrition is critical for both the patients’ and the families’ healing.

Chef Joe prepares carefully designed, nutritionally rich meals from whole, organic, locally grown ingredients designed to heal and strengthen the body.

Some clients receive counseling and instruction from staff members. Janelly Betances, who started with Healing Meals in June, works with low-income, food-insecure, pregnant teens and young women. “I love helping people,” she says. “I have had several other jobs, but I strongly believe that this is what I’m supposed to be doing in the world. We do important work here, and it’s inspiring to me to be a part of Healing Meals’ mission. Our clients learn how what they eat affects their health and the health of their babies.”

Hospitals, social workers, mental health centers and therapists refer clients to Healing Meals. Individuals can also apply for their services online at healingmealsproject.org

“I’ve had a lot of different jobs and careers that taught me things,” Leathers says. “I never ran a non-profit and I had never started a business, but my sister had been doing this for eight years, so I felt like I was standing on the shoulders of something that was well established.”

“Before I got sick, I worked for Proctor and Gamble in construction,” Leathers adds. “I’m very organized, and I just love watching things built from the ground up. We’re a work in progress. We’re always learning and always finding ways to improve what we do.”

To request services from Healing Meals or to join the Kindness Crew, visit healingmealsproject.org or call 860-264-5864.