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Local Nonprofit Turns to Restaurants To Provide Meals For Food Insecure

When Isabelle Lambotte founded Share My Meals to help Princeton's food insecure last January, she never imagined the organization would be scrambling to provide meals due to a fast-spreading global pandemic. Since COVID-19 arrived in Princeton, that is exactly what volunteers at the small nonprofit are doing.

Share My Meals works with local restaurants, corporations, universities, and suppliers to provide excess inventory to those facing difficulties putting food on the table. Currently, restaurants The Meeting House and Mezzaluna, both on Witherspoon Street, and The Blue Bear, in Princeton Shopping Center, are partnering with the organization while the crisis continues.

Lambotte knows restaurants that have managed to continue paying some staff won't be able to do so indefinitely. As a result, the organization is raising money to keep the program going.

"We are expecting this, as it is, to last less than two weeks," she said. "So my idea is to go ahead with these partners by raising money to cover the cost of staff and goods. It would be a win-win, because we could supply the food and they could continue to pay a limited part of their staff."

The Meeting House normally employs a staff of more than 50. Now limited to takeout and delivery, the eatery is currently

operating with a staff of five. Since joining with Share My Meals last week, the restaurant has been providing trays of healthful food, each of which feeds a family of five, to local residents registered with the program. On Tuesday, 15 trays were being prepared, to feed a total of 75.

"Our initial thought, when the crisis started, was to feed our staff," said Amanda Maher, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Amar Guatam. "Then Amar said, wouldn't it be great if there's some organization that we could cook meals for? We had been introduced to Share My Meals during Restaurant Week, so we emailed them. And we've gone from there."

The Meeting House is also providing trays for Princeton Nursery School, as well as the restaurant staff. "Our chef is really great at keeping costs down, and using things up creatively," said Guatam.

Lambotte founded Share My Meals after working at a mobile food pantry for many years. The supply of food wasn't steady, leading her to start her own venture. Before COVID-19 closed Princeton University, the Tiger Inn eating club was providing the nonprofit with meals for about 60 to 80 people, three times a week.

"Now, the situation has changed," Lambotte said. "Our major donors, like Princeton University, have

stopped activity. But we have received a very good reaction from the restaurants. We don't deliver them directly now, instead we ask the people to go and pick the meals up at the times that are assigned."

The partnership with restaurants is new and may need adjustment. "We have to see how it works," said Lambotte. "If we raise enough money, we can ask for 200 meals every day. I think working with these three restaurants is a good start."

For The Meeting House, which has only been open since November, partnering with Share My Meals has opened up an opportunity to connect further with the community. "It feels like the right thing to do, and we're in a fortunate situation where we can help," said Guatam. "There is a civic responsibility to get involved and do what we can."

Lambotte has contacted some corporations about obtaining support. In addition to funds, the organization needs more volunteers. "I think what we are doing is kind of unique," she said. "It's very local. We know exactly what we have to do. We have a personal relationship with the people we are helping. And it allows people to keep working and keep their role in society."

Visit sharemy meals.org for more information.

—Anne Levin