

Sharing food helps people overcome their isolation

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IN an east-end Toronto church basement, a dozen women — young, old, black, white and Oriental — cluster around a large kitchen table covered with cutting boards bearing little piles of diced carrots, peppers, zucchini and apples and circles and triangles of dough.

The kitchen is full of the aroma of baking sugar cookies.

On the face of it, what the women are doing is preparing treats for the children in the free drop-in centre down the hall, learning new ways to disguise vegetables so that kids will eat them.

But what's really happening is much more fundamental — even revolutionary. These women are among thousands of Canadians who are joining community kitch-

COMMUNITY KITCHENS / *Saving money on meals is one benefit, but cooking together also lets members talk about their problems.*

ens — places where neighbours get together to cook, and reap the benefits of stretching their food money, breaking social isolation, learning new skills and building a support network.

In a nation-wide movement that got its inspiration from Peru and its impetus from Canada's falling social-assistance payments, hundreds of community kitchens have sprung up with the help of tiny grants from social agencies and charities and a great deal of volunteer work by nutritionists.

The movement came first to Quebec, where 11 women

launched a kitchen in Montreal in 1990 after returning from a trip to Peru. Quebec now has at least 300 community kitchens. British Columbia has at least 100, and Ontario is quickly catching up, according to people working in the field.

In the Toronto church kitchen, Mary, a shy and inarticulate young mother in a baggy sweat-shirt and running shoes, stays out of the murmured conversation at first as she gravely watches older members of the group stuff vegetables and spices into tortilla and won ton shells.

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Kitchens counter isolation

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Another woman encourages Mary to sit down and try it. "You can do anything you want," she says. "It's all up to your own imagination, what you like."

Mary begins slowly, painstakingly, spreading cream cheese on a tortilla shell, then sprinkling on a few morsels of red pepper and cucumber. With child-like concentration, she rolls up the tortilla and takes it to the fridge.

An hour later, she seems to be a different woman. She's still spreading and sprinkling, but now with assurance and experimentation — and she's helping another newcomer learn how to do it and joining the chat about children, transit services and doctors in the neighbourhood.

Cooking, with its calming repetition and hands-on sensations, provides a relaxing way for lonely people to be with others, as well as a chance to eat well and cheaply, says Sara Lynch, a nutritionist with the City of Toronto who is deeply involved with the community kitchen movement in the city.

The women in the church basement will move on to a bigger group that meets twice a month and cooks huge batches of soup, bread and casseroles that will be divided into family and individual portions to take home.

They will get four or five nutritious meals for \$1 to \$2 a family — a godsend at a time when many Ontario families on social assistance have \$3 a person a day to feed themselves.

And they will get the incidental benefit of other members' knowledge about local food banks or legal aid services and find out who in their neighbourhood can cut hair, make dresses or will exchange babysitting.

"People chop vegetables together, they begin to chat. Perhaps they hear that one person went back to school, and it wasn't so bad, and they think 'maybe I can too,'" said Sister Gwen Smith, a nun who runs a Parkdale community house that serves many ex-psychiatric patients and holds four community kitchens a week.

However, membership in community kitchens is not limited to people struggling to survive — anyone can join, and that is part of their strength.



George O'Brien serves the meatloaf at a weekly community kitchen lunch at Toronto's Shalom House.

(FRED LUM/The Globe and Mail)

There is no stigma attached.

And because the groups are local and small — generally between six and 20 people — there is enormous diversity.

There is one in London, Ont., whose members are all unmarried men living in one part of town. Some are unemployed boarding-house tenants, others are university professors — their only common denominators are being single and not knowing how to cook, said Kathryn Scharf, who is involved in community kitchens with Metro Toronto's FoodShare program.

There are kitchens for the deaf and for the HIV-positive in Toronto, as well as a score of single-mother groups and several ethnically based groups, including an all-Somali one at a Metro Housing project.

Kitchens have been started on as little as \$40 for staples like flour, sugar and cooking oil. But that is the exception, according to activists.

"If they don't have enough initial funding, they need an extraordinary organizer who can beat the bushes for donations," Ms. Scharf said.

United Way has supplied start-up grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000 to establish community

kitchens in low-income and high-disability areas, in public housing projects where large numbers of single mothers and new immigrants live, and at senior citizens' clubs.

The kitchen space itself is usually provided by a church or community centre, though some operate out of people's homes. How much money is needed depends on how much equipment needs to be bought and how long the founding group needs to employ a leader to keep it going.

A big question for advocates is whether community kitchens can become self-sustaining, given the dearth of public and charitable dollars available.

Both Ms. Scharf and Kamla Sharma, allocations manager for the United Way of Metro Toronto, say the groups can be very fragile at first. If a couple of members don't show up because of illness or financial trouble, a group can peter out unless it has a strong leader or is based in an agency that has broader funding.

In Metro Toronto, United Way and FoodShare are negotiating with a major food corporation about longer-term support for community kitchens, but a deal is far from done.

Some of the agencies that have

become involved in community kitchens have doubts about a private-sector sponsor.

Shalom House, for instance, is doing an "ethical scan" of the corporation involved. And Sister Gwen said she is not willing to have her programs used in the corporation's advertising.

It remains to be seen whether community kitchens will become a political force in Canada, as they have in Peru.

What started there in the 1970s as small groups of women in shanty towns forming groups to get cheaper milk and vegetables has mushroomed into a popular movement, Ms. Scharf said.

Local operations have been consolidated into a national network that lobbies for social improvements.

"I understand they are quite a force to be reckoned with," Ms. Scharf said. "[But] it's a different context here, a harder context. People are more isolated. And all the [cultural] diversity means there are more bridges to build. But circumstances are getting more and more dire, so who knows?"

Already, local organizations have moved beyond the community kitchen to the next level — the community vegetable garden.

Land in churchyards and under hydro lines, even on high-rise rooftops, is being eyed hungrily by agencies that help the poor.

Agincourt Community Services Association in Scarborough is such an agency.

Two years ago, co-ordinator Fahima Biglar invited ministers from all the churches in the neighbourhood to the association's annual barbecue and engaged them in conversation about the expanses of land in the area covered by nothing but grass, and what a waste it seemed.

Shortly afterward, the local Lutheran church offered a chunk of land in its churchyard for a garden.

Now, 28 families work 20 plots. Ms. Biglar organized volunteer high-school students to strip off the grass and dig the earth.

Not only do the families grow enough fruit, vegetables and herbs to feed themselves through the summer and much of the winter, but they have enough left over to donate to food banks, Ms. Biglar said.

Next year, another area church will provide some land, so Ms. Biglar hopes to add 20 more families to the program, whose initial \$5,000 United Way grant has still not run out.