

The soup sorority

A growing network of people is helping women in crisis

BY SUSAN SCHWARTZ, THE GAZETTE APRIL 10, 2013

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Sharon Hapton, founder of Soup Sisters, second from left, is serving soup with the help of the three Soup Sisters volunteer co-ordinators for Montreal: Janis Morelli, left, Sylvie Calder, second from right, and Gail Corobow. They were photographed during the Montreal launch of Soup Sisters. About 30 people gather each month to prepare soup destined for shelters. In Montreal, the soup is going to Maison Flora Tristan.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier , The Gazette

MONTREAL - "There is nothing like soup," the writer Laurie Colwin observed in one of her many lyrical and evocative essays about food. "Soup has come to symbolize the ultimate in comfort and safety."

For women and children subjected to domestic abuse and forced to flee their homes for shelters, comfort and safety are in woefully short supply. The wish to provide them with a measure of both has been the driving force behind Soup Sisters, a hugely popular grassroots, volunteer-driven initiative in which 30 or so people gather once a month to prepare enough soup to supply the women and children of a shelter for the entire month.

Montreal had its inaugural Soup Sisters event one snowy evening in March at the Académie Culinaire in Old Montreal. Gail Corobow, one of three Montreal Soup Sisters volunteer co-ordinators, called it “one of the most exciting, enthusiasm-filled activities I have been involved with in a long time. There was a buzz ... it was an experience of participatory generosity.”

Working in teams, volunteers prepared more than 110 litres of soup — six kinds, including mushroom, bean and barley and split pea and root vegetable. As they waited for the soup to cool, they enjoyed a light meal together: soup, salad, French bread and a glass or two of wine. Then they ladled the soup into containers for delivery the following day to Maison Flora Tristan, which provides shelter and support to women and children who have been victims of domestic abuse.

“It is hard to imagine, from your one pot, how many containers it fills,” said Corobow, whose mother was on hand cooking that night, as well as her daughter. “You get to actually see your act of kindness.”

Soup Sisters was launched when Calgarian Sharon Hapton brought together 30 girlfriends at a local cooking school one evening in early March 2009 to celebrate her 50th birthday by making soup. Taking care of family and friends with soup, she says, is second nature to her: she knows its power to nourish and nurture. She invited the director of the local women’s shelter to speak; the soup they made was to be delivered the following day to its women and children.

“Something completely magical took place in the room that night,” Hapton recalled in her foreword to *The Soup Sisters Cookbook* (Appetite by Random House, 2012), which she edited. “From that moment, we were all given a greater purpose: to make the best soup that we could for people we didn’t know, whose lives had been affected by domestic abuse and family violence.”

Making soup for someone is a simple gesture, but a powerful one. “Soup is a tangible gift for people in crisis,” Hapton said at the Montreal launch, “and this is a community of people coming together to say, ‘We care and stand with you against domestic abuse.’ ”

She knew she wanted Soup Sisters to grow, but kept a low profile initially as she developed and came to understand it. “I wanted to be operationally ready for growth with the prototype before expanding into other markets,” said Hapton, an optician with considerable business experience.

The first expansion was to Toronto, a year later. A cooking school had heard about the project and approached her: Hapton visited and also went about establishing the core group of volunteers she knew would be crucial to the success of the events.

Celebrity chef Christine Cushing was guest chef at the Toronto launch and media coverage led to “a frenzy of people wanting to book events,” Hapton recalled. A television segment viewed nationally drew inquiries from around the country. “I could see what time zone and city it was airing in by the activity in my email,” she said.

Ten more cities followed; in March, Soup Sisters was launched in Winnipeg, then Montreal. Halifax will be next. Cooking schools are valued partners; they provide the venue, for one, and they have the proper equipment.

The initiative is not limited to Soup Sisters — there are Broth Brothers, too — but most volunteers with the not-for-profit organization are women. They pay \$50 apiece to participate in each event; most of it goes to the cooking school partner, which provides the ingredients, equipment and staff. The cooking school chefs or guest chefs also provide tips and guidance for volunteers. Although some are skilled in the kitchen, other volunteers have only basic skills. But that's fine. The recipes in the Soup Sisters repertoire are simple and, besides, they can learn.

The director of Maison Flora Tristan, Lise Gagné, will attend each event, to talk about her work and also to talk about domestic violence, Corobow explained. She represents the beneficiaries — and also the mission of the Soup Sisters, which is to comfort and support them and to raise awareness in order to prevent domestic abuse.

The volunteers cooking at each event are divided among six stations. Each station produces a different kind of soup, 15 litres worth, for a total of about 90 litres. A litre of soup yields four bowls. The first-line emergency shelters to which Soup Sisters reaches out usually accommodate between 30 and 50 women and children and so the volunteers make enough soup in one night to support a shelter for a month.

The soup, which is stored in a freezer at the shelter, is a boon not only for its women and children but also the shelter's bottom line: the gift of soup means an 18- to 20-per-cent decrease in its food costs.

At least one of the soups made at each event comes from the guest chef when there is one on hand, as Anne Desjardins was at the inaugural event in Montreal. The chef and co-owner of L'Eau à la bouche restaurant in Ste. Adèle, who provided a recipe for a luscious rutabaga and red lentil soup flavoured subtly with ginger and maple syrup, said she is proud to be involved with the Soup Sisters. She is frequently asked to participate in charitable events, she said, "and often, they are complicated galas ... I like things to be simple. I like the idea of soup, of simple recipes. And I like the idea that it's not just chefs; it's the idea that it's women who will share the joy of cooking together that made me say yes."

Soup Sisters events are often booked to capacity months in advance. The April event in Montreal, which took place on Tuesday, was sold out; already, availability is limited for much of 2013 and they're booking into 2014 in all 12 cities. Because this is an all-volunteer initiative, booking is online only, at soupsisters.org.

Hapton credits word of mouth, media attention and returning volunteers. Sometimes volunteers turn up in groups, to cook with friends or to celebrate birthdays or upcoming weddings or as part of a corporate or professional team-building activity. Others come on their own. "It is a way to meet people as well," Corobow said. "You are immediately engaged with five other people and then you are sitting down at a round table to eat together. It's inclusive. It's participatory. It works."

Clearly, the concept resonates with people. People contact Hapton to say they want to be involved, as Corobow and fellow Montrealers Janis Morelli and Sylvie Calder did independently — they did not know one another — and she brings them together as a team of coordinators. "The beauty of it is that they all become friends and love working together," she said.

Corobow, an integrative health consultant, learned of Soup Sisters when she heard Hapton being interviewed last fall by Sonali Karnick, host of All in a Weekend on CBC Radio One. The simplicity of the project and its immediacy drew her to it.

“It’s engaging and inclusive,” she said. “You are directly involved in the experience and the gesture of giving — and giving back ... I emailed immediately to say I would love to be involved.

“I have long been involved in feeding people in different parts of the world. I’m the one bringing food to sick people and to women who have just had babies. I believe food is the best drug — and Soup Sisters is just such a natural extension of who I am,” she said.

Morelli learned of the organization through the same interview, “and it struck a chord with me as something I would want to be involved with.” She works in health care and she is a dietitian by training. “Nourishing people: that’s what you do as a dietitian: you give people really nice, comforting, food.”

When Calder saw something online about Hapton and the Soup Sisters, “I remember thinking it was such a great idea and emailed her right away to ask if anything was happening in Montreal.”

The mother of two, who works in magazine newsstand promotions, had wanted to get involved as a community volunteer. “The timing was right and it has been exciting to be a part of launching Soup Sisters in Montreal.”

As volunteer coordinators, she, Morelli and Corobow are responsible for putting the events together and for making sure they run smoothly. They choose the soups from the organization’s repertoire to be prepared at each event.

The Soup Sisters Cookbook, a bestseller since its publication last October, features 100 recipes from chefs, cookbook authors and Soup Sisters: most make four to six servings. A second Soup Sisters cookbook, planned for the fall of 2014, is to include recipes from Quebec chefs.

Hapton said she has a list of 60 smaller Canadian cities interested in having a Soup Sisters presence. Because these locations tend not to have the cooking schools larger cities do, the model will probably involve partnerships with restaurants and hotels. “Not every small city has a wonderful cooking school,” she said, “but they all, sadly, have shelters.”

To learn more or reserve a place at one of the monthly events at Soup Sisters in Montreal, go to www.soupsisters.org. To learn more about the Académie Culinaire, go to www.academieculinaire.com.

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