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So All May Make a Difference

Megan Weadock

RFMA Gives helps a Denver cafe help its community

Food plays such an interesting, vital role in our lives. It has the power to bring back memories of childhood, help us bond with other people and, perhaps most importantly, keep us healthy and strong.

In the restaurant world, food can even be a way for us to help others—which is the inspired route that Brad and Libby Birky took when they opened the SAME Cafe in Denver in 2006.

Prior to entering the restaurant world, Libby was a school teacher and Brad worked in IT. They both wanted to do more, so they quit their full-time jobs, combined their life savings of \$30,000 and started the SAME Cafe.

“Our vision and the mission that we’ve gone by is trying to get healthier food out to a community of people who can’t access it through any other means,” Brad Birky said. “We wanted to target the working poor, single parents, people who are the fringe who don’t really have enough money to live on, but who make too much money to qualify for traditional services and help. We’re trying to catch the in-betweeners.”

The Birkys’ admirable mission caught the attention of RFMA Gives, the charitable arm of the Restaurant Facility Management Association. And in February, the SAME Cafe—which stands for “So All May Eat”—became the second recipient of RFMA Gives’ annual project and received a completely renovated kitchen.

Giving Back

Each year, RFMA Gives sets out to help an organization that operates a kitchen, community pantry or other meal-related effort, ideally in the host city of RFMA’s annual conference. The goal is to transform the facility, enabling the organization to touch even more people’s lives. Last year’s project led to the remodel at Someone Cares Soup Kitchen in Costa Mesa, Calif.

Bill Wallace, RFMA Board Member and RFMA Gives Project Manager, said this year was a little more complicated. He and Joe Robertson, the secondary Project Manager, searched through three different cities before finding the SAME Cafe.

“Everybody out in Vegas had already gotten some major love from all the charitable contributions from all the casinos and the hospitality industry in that town,” Wallace said. “And the few people that needed something ... none of them were in dire need of anything. We wouldn’t have been able to do much to really change their lives. We’re trying to do something on a fairly large scale to really change what they can do for the community.”

The Perfect Fit

The SAME Cafe was the last nonprofit that Wallace and Robertson found, in Denver. Right away, it seemed like the perfect fit.

“They were in the most need of help,” Wallace said. “And they’d been open for five years and had already doubled their footprint by expanding into another retail space next door. They were definitely willing to be there for a long time and committed to their own success.”

Despite the Birkys’ hard work and best intentions, the SAME Cafe was limited by its small, basic kitchen.

“They had no way of cooking any proteins,” Wallace explained. “In the restaurant industry, you can’t do anything

without proteins. They had no hood system or ventilation; they were serving two soups a day, two salads a day and two homemade pizzas a day. Any meats they were putting on the pizza were coming from precooked sources, like salamis. So it was very obvious that they were in need.”

Birky agrees that space and limited resources were a huge challenge over the years.

“When we started the kitchen five years ago, we had very little funding,” he said. “We had just the basics: a very small convection oven and two soup warmers. And we were trying to feed all these people. Along with limited storage—we didn’t even have enough refrigeration space to have fresh fruit brought in. We were definitely limited on the amount of food we could have on hand at any one time, which limited the amount of people we could feed.”

Wonderfully Different

The SAME Cafe is the first non-profit restaurant in Denver, and it uses a pay-what- you-can approach. Guests pay what they think is fair or what they’re able to pay into a donation box on the counter. If a guest can’t pay at all, he or she can volunteer to exchange some light kitchen work for a hearty meal.

It’s an approach that is growing in popularity, as chains like Panera try out the concept. For the Birkys, it’s proven effective for the last five years.

“We feel a model like ours is needed in many different parts of the country, especially in larger cities that have a high concentration of folks that are struggling,” Birky said. “Especially with the cost of living being what it is and incomes being slashed and unemployment running rampant, we knew that there was a need here that wasn’t being filled.”

The SAME Cafe is an all-volunteer organization. And until the remodel, Brad and Libby sometimes faced challenges training new volunteers with such limited resources.

“We’ve been kind of cobbling along whenever a new person comes in, figuring out how to do things and how to make it work,” Birky said. “For example, vegetables had to be roasted in the convection oven, at a specific temperature, and that’s how we had to do it. We couldn’t just cook them on a stove, like normal people do.”

A Meaningful Makeover

It was clear to Wallace and Robertson that the SAME Cafe needed RFMA Gives’ help. And the RFMA Board of Directors unanimously agreed with them.

With the help of volunteer members and local contractors, RFMA Gives completely transformed the kitchen of the SAME Cafe. The makeover greatly increased the number of daily meals the Birkys can serve and will enable them to prepare a wider variety of meals.

“We’re absolutely overwhelmed at the support that we got from our membership,” Wallace said. “The amount of equipment that was donated by our restaurant and vendor companies, and then all the people who have shown up on the work site, it’s just an unbelievable outpouring of support. I’m so proud of RFMA for what we’ve been able to do for the SAME Cafe.”

The cafe received three new reach-in refrigerators, a huge reach-in freezer, a six-burner range/oven combo, a gas grill, a 6-gallon soup kettle, a new grease hood, a new ventilation system, improved lighting, new plumbing, additional storage and even more electrical outlets. Volunteers at the cafe will now be able to work on a custom-made prep table, while customers will be greeted by a beautiful new granite service station.

Wallace explained that most of the equipment for the remodel came from restaurant companies that were willing to donate new materials or used items from their own storage.

“We also had some vendors this year donate some very pricey new equipment,” he said. “We were very grateful for that. And there are a lot of restaurant companies headquartered in Denver, so we knew we would have the manpower when it came time to staff the actual remodel. So we had facility managers, project managers, facility directors take a day off or two from their work to come help. It worked out very well.”

Now, the new appliances, work table, storage and more will make the training curve for volunteers much easier, helping each person’s effort be even more effective.

“Volunteers can spread out now and get a lot more work accomplished all at once,” Birky said. “And when the customers come in, they’re treated to a really nice, more professional setup now.”

The Birkys will be able to diversify their food offerings more than they ever dreamed. And they’re planning to add another meal to each day.

"When it's all said and done, we'll be able to reach out to far more people than we have in the past," Birky said. "We'll be so much more effective for the community. Originally, we were just open for lunch, and it looks like now with the extra storage we have we may be able to add a second meal— breakfast or dinner—which by itself would reach a much larger population of people."

The Giving Spirit

The Birkys still can't believe the transformation that's occurred at their cafe.

"I don't think people understand what a huge expense and a huge amount of labor is involved in each of those things," Brad Birky said. "Maybe we would have been able to buy an extra refrigerator or two one day, but there's no way we could have paid to have this all done."

The contractors' and RFMA's giving spirit and hard work not only changed their business forever, Birky said; it also touched their hearts.

"People will never really know how deeply this affects Libby and I," he said. "We're so in love with this group; it's just incredible. Every day is a new thrill. We're very excited to have been chosen, we feel so lucky, and we feel incredibly blessed to have this come down on our little husband-and- wife operation that we have going."

Wallace and the entire RFMA Gives team feel just as lucky to have been involved.

"It's absolutely the most heartwarming work I've ever been involved with," Wallace said. "If I could do this full-time, I would love to. This is so rewarding, to meet people like this, to have such an impact on the community. And being able to give back to people who have given so much to the community ... It was time that somebody gave back to them. It's nothing but a labor of love."

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