In Pursuit of Fulsomeness: Campus Kitchens at Kearney

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In the autumn of 2006, the University of Nebraska at Kearney formally launched its branch of Campus Kitchens. Its forerunner, National Campus Kitchens, has been a successful leader in the realm of anti-hunger programs on college campuses across the United States since 2001, inspiring 64 offshoots over the years.

Interestingly, as its number of successors would seem to suggest, Campus Kitchens’ mission to “Strengthen Bodies, Empower Minds, and Build Communities” by overcoming a community’s nutritional hunger needs seems to thrive off hunger of a different sort—a craving for fulfillment that cannot be found in self-focus. When Martin Demoret, then an Honors student from Scottsbluff, now a litigator in Des Moines, founded UNK’s Campus Kitchens with a group of like-minded peers way back in 2006, he could not have known that this step into humanitarianism would produce the ripple effect that it did. He describes the founding of UNK’s Campus Kitchens as a product of a collective awakening on his part and those of his peers “to the fact that we were living pretty self-focused lives and didn’t want to continue down that path… Campus Kitchen, at its core, was the result of an epiphany that our ‘talk’ wasn’t getting anything done—and that wasn’t ok any longer.”

This epiphany was promptly acted upon by Dr. Peter Longo, who “sensed a fire brewing and quickly introduced us to the reality of how widespread poverty was/is in central Nebraska, particularly for children and the elderly.” Demoret and his peers, when faced with this fact, knew that they could utilize their
skills and talents as instruments to fill the gap between what is and what should be, allowing the community to benefit from their realization that self-focus never bettered the world. As Demoret says, “At some point, our focus shifted from our personal angst to caring about our neighbors and believing that we could do something for them. That shift transformed the UNK Campus Kitchen Project from a fun idea into something that we had to do.”

Then as now, Campus Kitchens provides the less-privileged in the Kearney community with a reliable source of nutrition. Initially, Demoret and his fellow founders “set up delivery routes and assigned core volunteers to regularly lead delivery teams on those routes, which allowed our clients to see familiar faces and develop relationships with our volunteers.” This allowed Campus Kitchens’ clients to interact with the students who cared enough to ensure their twice-weekly access to food, drawing the campus and the community closer together.

This was an initial goal and reward of Campus Kitchens’, prompting Demoret to say now, more than a decade later, that “I’m convinced that many of our clients valued their twice-weekly visits with college students far more than the food we delivered.” This provision of “food and friendship to people who are often forgotten,” according to Demoret, was the first level of Campus Kitchens’ overall goal.

Running Campus Kitchens on a college-student schedule is a task that falls not far short of Herculean, by itself. When commitments are made to a community, a student learns to expect more of him- or herself, creating a previously unprecedented level of personal achievement. When self-concern is removed from the equation, success is often the result. Indeed, Demoret comments that “Our founding group of students went on to thrive and overachieve in their professional lives after we left UNK, and I suspect that happened, in part, because we learned how to be ethical, disciplined young professionals through the cauldron of starting and running a non-profit we really cared about. I think most of us would agree that Campus Kitchens gave us a lot more than we gave to it.”

So, on to the question on everyone’s lips, how can current UNK students achieve self-fulfillment through filling the community’s
bellies? You can, of course, give of your time and money to help Campus Kitchens fulfill its mission. Volunteers to make meals and deliver them are always welcome. Demoret, when asked this question, calls upon the faculty as well as the students: “We succeeded because key faculty members invested time in our development, cast vision for us, and held us accountable to setting and seeking our own vision for the program.”

To quote a cliché, college is a time of self-discovery. So many potentially powerful students only require direction, a catalyst of self-invention. And, very often, humanitarianism provides this sense of purpose, an opportunity to step away from yourself and look at the world in a different way. Demoret sums this up: “I’m convinced a fulsome college education should include teaching students about the issues their own communities face and requiring them to apply the concepts/skills they are learning to engage with those problems head-on. Students need to understand how issues like poverty and inequality play out around them because, for most of us, our greatest sphere of impact will be with our neighbors.”

College life is endlessly potentially fulsome. The amount of self-fulfillment derived from it is entirely dependent on the individual student. At some point, if you would like to mean something to the world, you must define yourself, so that the world knows what you stand for and against. It is impossible to do so unless you give yourself a purpose by devoting yourself to a meaningful cause. Campus Kitchens provides such a cause, a way to sate the community’s hunger while defining yourself.