



family

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Healing foods soothe ravages of cancer

Meals 2 Heal provides nourishing meals, education



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Touches of turmeric meld with wafts of cumin, as rice simmers on the stove top. Apron-clad chefs scurry about tossing tempers and prepping peas. And, like heat from an oven, energy emanates out of the kitchen in Calvary United Methodist Church.

It's cancer-inspired cooking. Or, as Kathie Heimerdinger calls it, Meals 2 Heal.

Soon to be delivered to the doorsteps of patients across Middle Tennessee, the organic meals prepared by this group of volunteers represent the vision of a foundation that honors Heimerdinger's husband, Mike, who died of cancer in 2011.

When cancer invades a loved one, she said, there is a sense of chaos. As the body's cells divide and grow, stress builds not only for the patients because of what they deal with emotionally, mentally and physically, but also for the caregivers.

In that calamity, food can offer a sense of control and comfort. And, for a growing number of patients, caregivers and medical professionals in Middle Tennessee, there also comes a belief that food may play a role in prevention, prolonged life or a potential cure.

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MEALS 2 HEAL

Meals 2 Heal provides healthy, nourishing meals to people in Davidson and Williamson counties who are in crisis due to a cancer diagnosis. Meals are free and delivered directly to clients' homes once a week for three months.

The focus is on patients who have little or no caregiving support and are financially unable to provide themselves nutritious food. Each weekly delivery includes four entrees, two soups and two sides. Food is from organic and sustainable sources and does not include any refined flours or sugars, processed foods or additives.

TO BECOME A RECIPIENT

To find out more, contact Robin at clients@heimerdingerfoundation.com. New clients are contacted by a liaison to schedule an in-person meeting to review available services.

TO BECOME A TEEN VOLUNTEER

As part of the Meals 2 Heal structure, teens work with mentor chefs to prepare meals. Through hands-on experience in the kitchen and garden, students learn about nutritious foods and acquire basic cooking skills. The goal is to empower them to make healthier choices in their lives and influence others to do the same.

To learn more about volunteer opportunities, email volunteer@heimerdingerfoundation.com or call 615-241-0246.

Heal

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"Every step of the way, in cancer, we find that diet matters," said Dr. Jordan Berlin, co-director of gastrointestinal oncology and Ingram professor of cancer research at Vanderbilt University.

Food as medicine

Mike Heimerdinger died at age 58 in a treatment center in Mexico after a 10-month battle with what Kathie called a small-cell, fast-moving cancer. The trip below the border became the final stop in a grueling journey to destroy his body's disease. It began after a doctor's visit in November 2010.

Four days after diagnosis, the man who spent eight seasons as Tennessee Titans offensive coordinator began chemotherapy and radiation treatment at Nashville's Sarah Cannon Cancer Center. In the room with the doctor, Mike and his wife were told about different food restrictions.

Kathie was in a fog, but what she remembers were the instructions to eat no red meat and no vegetables or fruits unless they could be peeled. "We went home in disbelief," Kathie said. "We knew we needed to make some changes."

Mike always had been a hamburger and steak type of guy. The football coach ate the calorie-dense foods off the Titans training table. Meals at home would be comfort foods of meatloaf and roasts. And there were "French fries, French fries, French fries — that was his vegetable," Kathie said.

As his treatment progressed, his diet transformed. Kathie absorbed information, learning about the power of sea vegetables' phytonutrients and the nutritional boost of beets. She began to juice and use wheatgrass. And she purchased foods she had never heard of, like kale and quinoa.

"We went the whole gamut with anything we could find that would be healthy to help alkalize and get rid of the acidity in the body," she said.

When the Nashville doctors told Mike there was nothing more they could do, he sought treatment at Block Center in Chicago. There, he fought the disease with a "whole body approach" that incorporated nutritional intervention, mind-body therapies and supplements, in addition to chemotherapy.

The treatment center offered cooking classes for caregivers as they waited during patient treatment. They received handouts for healthy recipes. And the center had an "unbelievable library of cookbooks and information for food good in healing of body for cancer."

The cancer-related impact of food continues to be a growing area of research, said Berlin, a medical oncologist at Vanderbilt. But there is an increasing body of literature that shows a connection between diet, nutrition and cancer.



Jason Heslop, 15, prepares meals as a volunteer for Meals 2 Heal.



Kathie Heimerdinger, wife of former Titans coach Mike Heimerdinger, who died of cancer in 2011, founded Meals 2 Heal in honor of him. PHOTOS BY GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN

Studies that examine the effect of specific foods or specific diets are challenging, he said, because people self-report what they eat and most diets have significant variety.

But, Berlin said, a person could distill it down to this: Foods that are low in fat are good. Americans shouldn't eat the quantities they do, because obesity is bad. Consuming high quantities of fruits and vegetables is good. High sugar consumption is bad.

There also is some concern that too much dairy and meat protein may play a role in cancer, but that's "definitely not proven," Berlin said.

"What is proven is that leading a healthier lifestyle is 'not going to hurt,'" he said. If it happens to have the cancer-preventing benefits suggested by new data, he said, then "that's a good thing, and at worst we just eat healthier."

"Enough's enough" Thad Beaty's diet transition didn't happen all at once.

"It's not like my mom got cancer, and the next day I was a vegan," the Nashville musician said. But it was almost like that.

A little more than five years ago, Beaty, a guitarist for Sugarland, was playing an amphitheater just outside of Birmingham when his mom called with news of her diagnosis — colon cancer.

"It's devastating," Beaty said. "It scares you to death, and you don't know what to do."

Like most people, Beaty immediately turned to the Internet for answers. Within days, he said, the link between cancer and diet seemed obvious to him.

Whether a website cited artificial sweeteners, processed foods or too much animal product as a cancer culprit, Beaty

pointed to it as part of his mom's diet. He also looked in the mirror. He saw a man 75 pounds overweight, with high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and a loved one with a deadly disease.

"It was basically a time to say enough's enough," he said. "As a family, we revolutionized the way we eat and the way we approach food in general. We started researching anti-cancer diets, and saw that we should eat 51 percent raw."

And so began the philosophy of crowding out bad foods. Beaty lost 75 pounds, turned vegan, and started Music That Moves — an organization that encourages musicians to give back in healthy ways. His mom — whose tumor was surgically removed — lost 50 pounds, became vegetarian and remains cancer-free.

If you ask Beaty, his mom's current physical health is 100 percent diet-related. "No questions asked," he said.

Medical research supports that claim, according to Berlin.

"It's certainly not definitive data, but several studies are consistent," Berlin said. "Once you have cancer removed — in colon cancer, at least — people who had a healthier diet were less likely to have cancer come back."

For cancer patients like Jeff Brown, that leads to constant introspection.

After being treated at a place where the doctor only was interested in "4 ounces of me, my prostate, not the remaining 180 pounds," the Nashvillean sought treatment with his prostate cancer with Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Southeastern Regional Medical Center in Georgia. There, he learned to focus on his whole body.

Now, when the 67-year-old survivor looks at food, he asks himself "Do I want to eat this or do I want to take a chance on it hurting me?" The answer is usually obvious.

"It's a lot easier to stay healthy than it is to heal," he said.

Goal is prevention A cookbook selected from the Block Center shelves inspired Kathie Heimerdinger's mission to help others make those healthy decisions.

With an eye-catching green cover, the "Nourishing Connections Cookbook" was created by Ceres Community Project, a California-based nonprofit that creates healthy meals for those impacted by serious illness.

Ceres is the model for Meals 2 Heal.

Now, sporting a ball cap adorned with a pink breast cancer ribbon, Heimerdinger oversees the small kitchen that serves as the budding organization's base camp. Using the information gained through her husband's treatment, she curates each meal with her head chef making sure only organic, unrefined, unprocessed ingredients are used.

Heimerdinger knows with the toxins of cancer treatments, taste buds change. Patients often lose their appetite and struggle to stomach foods. With that in mind, each meal is beautifully packaged. Every sprig of spinach or sprinkle of chives is placed with the hope of making the look as appealing as the taste.

There is a garden outside where Meals 2 Heal soon will grow fresh vegetables. And eventually teens from local schools will fill the kitchen, learning to prepare healthy foods with the goal of spreading the healthy lifestyle message to homes throughout Middle Tennessee.

The mission may be to serve cancer patients who have little to no caregiving support or money to purchase healthy foods, but the ultimate goal is prevention — and that means teaching the younger generation about health and nutrition.

As ancient Greek physician Hippocrates once said: Let food be thy medicine.



Steve Berk prepares vegetables at Meals 2 Heal, which provides nutrient-rich meals and education for cancer patients. PHOTOS BY GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN



ONLINE

To go inside the Meals 2 Heal kitchen and to watch Thad Beaty make his "Frog Swamp Breakfast" smoothie, check out the videos at Tennessee.com/Family. Subscribers, please go to Tennessee.com/Activate to access additional digital content.