

Kansas Legal Services

A non-profit law firm and community education organization helping low and moderate income people in Kansas



www.kansaslegalservices.org

The story of a little cafe in Lawrence, Kansas and feeding the hungry



Meg Heriford and Erin Brown prepare to serve sack lunches to locals who are beginning to congregate on the sidewalk out front at Ladybird Diner in Lawrence, Kansas. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

Meg's choice: She could reopen her diner. But what about the hungry people she's feeding?

By [Annie Gowen](#) September 15, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. CDT Copyright: [Washington Post](#)

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Everyone was hungry, and the free sack lunches Meg Heriford has been handing out at her shuttered diner since the pandemic began disappeared with alarming speed.

Before the shutdown, Ladybird Diner was a busy spot on the main street of this college town, where up to 600 people a day packed into the tiny space, a swirl of chaos and vitality, pancakes and pie — coconut cream with lofty meringue, apple with rustic latticework and the one they called the Duchess, with a sour cream custard, blackberries and topped with oat crumble.

The “Fresh Daily” case was empty now, the turquoise vinyl booths devoid of diners and the rotating dessert tower turned into temporary storage for loaves of bread.

Days after Heriford closed her doors in March and laid off her staff, she and two former employees began making sack lunches for anybody in town who needed one — “no strings, no questions, no substitutions.” The need was acute — the homeless population had been increasing even before the pandemic, and 9,100 people in the county out of work, about a quarter of them from the food service industry.

At first, it was a simple: white paper bags with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and some chips, but word spread quickly. Eventually they were feeding more than 200 a day in a program funded by community donations, some 13,000 meals for furloughed factory workers, laid-off bartenders, cleaners with no homes to clean, mechanics with nothing to repair.

Now, her state is in the middle of a rocky reopening and Heriford, 46, finds herself facing the same tough decisions many restaurateurs and chefs are grappling with across the country as the restaurant industry recovery has stalled and the United States remains in the grip of the deadly coronavirus.

In the heart of this pandemic summer, some restaurants have yet to reopen, still struggling to find a workable way forward with diminished capacity or takeout only. Others tried to restart, only to shut down again as cases surged. And many more are gone forever — more than 20,000 restaurants have closed nationwide since the start of the pandemic, according to the National Restaurant Association, with tens of thousands more expected to close.

In Lawrence's downtown, nearly a third of the restaurants have either delayed reopening, reopened and then scuttled indoor dining — or closed all together.

Heriford faced an agonizing choice — should she try to reopen Ladybird Diner as it was, and if

so, what about the people she's feeding — the newly destitute families who come shyly, pushing their masked kids to the front of the line? Or Jerry, the local busker who treats her to a slightly off-key serenade every day?

She's been a small-business owner and a fixture in this Midwestern town for years, but now the pandemic had changed everything. And changed her.

"This is noble work, feeding people. I don't want to cheapen it, to try to cram as many nickels as I can into the piggy bank," she said.

But she also had her own family to feed.



Booth space repurposed to stage pantry items. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

A growing need

They were already waiting in line when by the time the doors opened. First came some homeless residents, toting backpacks and bedrolls, whom Heriford fondly calls “the regulars.” The families and those who have been recently laid off, unused to the formalities of need, waited in their cars.

Heriford and former employee Erin Brown wheeled out three tall racks of roast beef and cheese

sandwiches, brats and pasta in paper cartons, the scent of garlic and tomato sauce wafting through the warm summer air.

“Hi, good morning!” Heriford said. “Let’s do kids first.”

The crowd pressed in.

“Can I take two?” one woman asked.

“Can I take one for my fiance?” asked another.

“You can always take as much as you need,” said Brown.

An unemployed landscaper arrived with his 11-year-old son in tow, breathless.

“Am I too late?” he asked. “I thought I was early.”

Jerry, the busker with a white sea captain’s beard, took two roast beef sandwiches to his favorite bench and ate, watching as the rest of the lunches disappeared so quickly Heriford was left shaken.

Before, it was fun to run out of things at the diner, to hear the call of “86 coconut cream!” ringing from server to server in the tightly packed cafe. Now when they run out, Heriford has to direct people to the Salvation Army or the church up the street, or quickly throw together a make-do bag with whatever extras they have in hand.

“It felt really awful. It went so fast,” Heriford said. “That sense of urgency feels overwhelming. People were stressing out. I was thinking, ‘Oh, my God, what am I going to do with all these hungry people?’”



Jerry comes to the door every day after lunch and performs a song on his harmonica. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

Lawrence is a liberal bastion in a county of 121,400 residents in a red state where life revolves around the University of Kansas. With a plethora of students and service workers, the county has a far higher percentage of people living in poverty than the state overall — 18 percent vs. 12 percent. Its homeless census grew 39 percent over the past two years, which organizers said was from better counting as well as increased need.

Jerry used to spend his days at the library, sitting in an Internet station with his ear buds, reading up on music theory or practicing tunes with an online metronome. But they're only allowing patrons in now for short periods of time, "express service," which leaves him at loose ends.

"I couldn't imagine trying to get through winter with nowhere to go," he said. "Will it kill me? I don't know. But it will kill a lot of people."

In the early days of the pandemic, when things still seemed temporary, it was easy for Heriford to imagine a day when she'd be able to invite him to sit at the counter for a meal.

“It will be such a happy day when we can invite Jerry inside,” she had said earlier to Brown as they dropped single-serving Oreo packages and apples into paper bags, assembly-line style. Brown’s wife, Channon Nitz, was in the kitchen, preparing sandwiches.

“What will he order, I wonder?” Brown said.

“Chicken fried steak!”

“That sounds about right,” Brown said.

“He really deserves it,” Heriford said. “Talk about staying cheerful. When he was singing that Woody Guthrie song the other day, I was transported to another century.”

Each day when the crowd dissipates, Jerry pulls out his harmonica and sings them a little tune, his choice in keeping with the mood of the day. One day it was Woody Guthrie. One day — when Nitz made Creole stew — it was Hank Williams’s “On the Bayou.”

Heriford had been thinking for weeks about what reopening the diner would mean, how it would look, how she would keep her 30 employees safe. She and her partners — including Matt Hyde, who owns the fancier restaurant three doors up where Heriford got her start — poured over restaurant group websites from California to Hong Kong. They read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance. They talked to the county health department.

She entertained the idea of servers and cooks in masks and face shields, temperature checks, space-age dining pods, elaborate disinfection systems. Accessing government help for small businesses like the Paycheck Protection Program would be difficult because the diner’s tiny space — a kitchen of only 6-by-10 feet — meant it would be difficult to socially distance cooks as required.

Each day at the diner had been a show, rough and imperfect but danced through with joy, with baby-kissing, laughter and high-fives.

Who were they without those things?



Meg Heriford proposes a new business plan to her partners at 715 Restaurant in May. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

A new plan

One afternoon, Heriford's landlord, Bob Schumm, stopped by to say hello, weaving his way through the lime green plastic chairs that serve as barricades to keep passersby out of the restaurant.

"When are you guys reopening?" Schumm asked, his voice muffled through his mask.

Heriford was vague. What she didn't tell her landlord — "It's a longer conversation," she said — was she was trying to come up with a model to continue free lunches as well as make a little money.

She opened the diner in 2014, filling it with antique stools from North Carolina, old-fashioned ice cream glasses and colorful Pyrex bowls turned upside for lights because she couldn't afford pricey fixtures.

She was working at Hyde's farm-to-table 715 Restaurant as a waitress and occasional pastry chef when he asked her one night if she would make a pie. She chose one of the simplest — buttermilk. Just egg yolks, buttermilk, heavy cream, sugar, corn meal and a lacing of fresh nutmeg on top.

When it sold out in an hour, Hyde and his other partners began looking for a place for her to make pies full time.

She named the cafe after Ladybird Johnson, the former first lady who made everything beautiful. Pies were on the menu of course — “pies people connect with, pies with resonance, time-traveler pies” — along with the chicken and noodles like her grandmother used to make.

The neon sign outside said simply: “EAT.”

The diner quickly gained a loyal following, with more than 30,000 on its Facebook page.

Continuing the food program without reopening the diner would set Heriford on a path of financial uncertainty. It is the primary source of income for her family — her songwriter husband, Arthur, and the three of her four children who remain at home: Macie, 17, Eula, 11, and Ilsa, 7. Her oldest, Billy Duke, lost his job as a cook at the cafe when it shut.

Already the family was surviving on a lot of rice and beans, augmenting with vegetables from the garden. Depleting their savings and refinancing the house was the next option, she and Arthur decided. She joked they had just enough wiggle room to make some terrible financial decisions, but deep down she worried — would it be reckless?

“I don’t have a lot of skills, so it’s not like if this doesn’t work out, I can be a plumber or something,” she said.

That’s happening everywhere: Restaurants across the country that became soup kitchens in the early days of the pandemic are facing the same uncertainty, even as need persists. Celebrity chef José Andrés’s foundation has spent \$86 million supporting more than 2,000 restaurants doing similar free meals like Heriford’s independent effort. But that bulk of money will run out by the end of August, the nonprofit said.



Channon Nitz prepares Brautwurst to be added to sack lunches at Ladybird Diner. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

Heriford waited weeks for her unemployment benefits along with thousands of others delayed by the state's overwhelmed system. She has been using the restaurant's line of credit to pay the \$5,000 monthly rent. Donations for the lunches are drying up.

In the evenings, while Arthur and the girls were asleep, Heriford opened up her grease-splattered MacBook Air and began making a plan for the Ladybird Diner Community Kitchen and Market, a combined community kitchen with a store selling fresh produce and prepared meals.

When Heriford presented her partners — Hyde and two other local business executives — with the new vision, they were supportive but reluctant to accrue any more debt. Hyde is trying to reopen his own restaurant with mostly outdoor seating in September.

"I realize the challenges are daunting," Hyde said. "But if I had to put all of my eggs in a basket to make something work, I would put them in Meg's basket. She's like Yoda to me."

Afternoons at the diner are quieter, more contemplative, as they assemble pantry boxes of

staples to see families through weekends when they're not serving lunch.

Older donors who can't figure out Venmo stop by and leave crumpled \$20 bills that sit by the cash register until they're safe to touch. People drive by and toot their horns. Heriford's daughter Macie, who has worked at the diner since she was 14, comes by to help.

Her former employees have picked up pantry boxes for their own families, or just come by to say hi.

One afternoon, Jessica Manlove, 31, pulled up in front of the restaurant with her husband and two kids in a black truck with a busted muffler and monster wheels. The couple is trying to survive the pandemic with a scrap metal business they call "Redneck Recycling." Their stove was on the fritz, so Heriford called for donations on the Facebook page, ending up with a microwave and a toaster oven.

Heriford lugged the appliances out into the street along with a pantry box she'd tailored for Manlove and her family with some staple food items, Hot Pockets and prepared soups and stews.

"I'm trying to file for unemployment, but I couldn't get through," Manlove said. "I stayed on the line for an hour, hitting the button again and again. How long before it gets better?"

"I got through this morning, so stay with it," Heriford counseled.

"Are you doing sack lunches, too, right now?" Manlove asked. Heriford added four bags with peanut butter sandwiches, chips and granola bars to the box.



Phyllis Wilson and Boston receiving sack lunches at Ladybird Diner in May. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

'Time to say goodbye'

It was Jerry who finally led her to the solution. As the sun came out after a rainy night, he stepped up to the patio railing for her daily serenade, singing the old Johnny Nash song “I Can See Clearly Now” and playing the harmonica they bought for him.

She decided whatever rebirth would happen for Ladybird had to include Jerry and the rest of the hungry people she’d been serving.

"I can't write them out of it," she said. "Maybe it will work, maybe it doesn't. But it definitely feels like it's worth a shot."

She went home and broke the news to her family over dinner and then emailed her staff.

"It's time to say goodbye to what we were, at least for while," she wrote. Already, "I miss 'us.' "

The way forward looked hard. There was not a five-year plan. There was not a six-month plan. Thirty days was all she could do.

For now, she would move forward with the community kitchen and market, spending August fundraising for the free lunch programs by putting together a book of essays on diner life called "Ladybird, Collected." She needs more than \$100,000 to hire back eight staffers, keep the feeding program going into the fall and possibly open the new market by the end of the year.

A few days later, she was back at work thinking through the possibilities as she made herself an iced coffee behind the bar, mentally redecorating the space, planning where the new cases for takeout meals, to-go pie slices and batched homemade cocktails would go. The bar was still as it had been left in March — a chalkboard sign still advertised the local beer offerings, fairy lights still twinkled around a bust of Elvis.

"It's hard, because I haven't had time to say a proper goodbye to Ladybird," she said. "There's no way to do it now. It's already gone."

There was no time to mourn. Outside, the regulars were lining up at the door, and they were ready to eat.



Meg Heriford getting ready to begin serving sack lunches at Ladybird Diner. (Colin MacMillan/For The Washington Post)

Printed: September 26, 2020

<http://www.kansaslegalservices.org/node/2378/story-little-cafe-lawrence-kansas-and-feeding-hungry>

©Kansas Legal Services