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### Charlotte Community Returns to the Kitchen

On a crisp, chilly Sunday morning in January, the sun shines through clouds in a patchy morning sky. Vehicles fill a parking lot at a community college campus on the edge of uptown Charlotte, North Carolina, and clusters of people, dressed in thick sweaters or puffy vests, exit their cars and make their way into the culinary arts building.

Some are here pursuing philanthropic goals or anticipating a reunion with a cherished friend. Others are here to express gratitude for compassionate care or to enjoy a respite from providing it. Today is the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual Soup On Sunday fundraiser for Hospice and Palliative Care of the Charlotte Region, and guests are arriving to build community by eating comfort food.

In the building's entrance volunteers wearing white aprons printed with HPCCR's sunset logo accept tickets and direct hungry eventgoers to the second floor where a display of pottery stretches the length of the landing. Guests who have purchased premium tickets slow to select a bowl created by a local potter as a memento. Others proceed briskly through a hallway to a large room bathed in sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. Several square tables covered by crisp, white tablecloths stand in the center of the room and a musician is playing his acoustic guitar in the corner. Although it is less than 20 minutes past the official 11 a.m. start time, the room is bustling with activity. Those who walk past the volunteers offering slices of fresh bread, tiny Bundt cakes and cupcakes are tempted by the sight and spicy scent of pizzas emerging piping hot from a bank of gleaming ovens.

A few steps past the pizza bar they are greeted by a sight made rare by the events of the past three years. The scene looks like the crowded kitchen of an exceedingly well-attended

house-party. The wide hallway reveals twin, industrial-sized kitchens. Four banks of stoves stand around the perimeter, and stainless steel hoods line the walls. Low blue flames tickle the bottoms of enormous pots marked by the scars of years of service. Chefs in whites stand in front of the stoves and behind stainless steel worktables ladling samples of steaming, fragrant soup into white styrofoam containers the size of cupcake liners. Guests are milling shoulder to shoulder. Snippets of conversations, frequent “excuse me’s” and called greetings create a din unknown during pandemic lockdowns.

More than 30 Charlotte-area restaurants and cooking schools join to contribute their time and talent to create soups and stews for the event. CPCC’s students serve hot, rich and nutty Virginia Peanut soup and a pale green, creamy Chilled Watercress Soup with poached shrimp and plump, jade spheres of cucumber. The Community Culinary School of Charlotte’s chef offers hearty White Bean and Chicken soup, thick with shredded meat.

Red Rock Café & Bakery’s staff are busy serving samples of She Crab Soup. Lumps of crab meat float in a pale cream. A dash of sherry on top provides a welcome contrast to the soup’s buttery flavor. The Broccoli-Fontina Bisque prepared by The Fig Tree is a cheesy, satisfying vehicle for a dollop of smokey bacon and onion chutney.

For Adam Reid, chef and owner of Santé Restaurant, this event has become an annual tradition. “We’ve been doing this since, probably the fifth year they’ve started, so we’ve been doing this for 18 years and my daughter used to come here and help us too, so it was an awesome family kind of event that we just loved.” Reid said.

“I have had family members, not here in Charlotte, who have used hospice services before, so it is kind of close to my heart,” he continued while sprinkling pumpkin seeds,

microgreens and deftly squeezing white cream s-shaped squiggles onto individual samples of golden yellow Roasted Butternut Squash Soup.

Reid is also enthusiastic about preparing soups. “A chef can really demonstrate all their flavor, talent and stuff by executing a soup from nothing,” he explains before turning to serve another guest.

Sampling every available offering is challenge some guests appear to be willing to accept. Some creative, resourceful, or perhaps merely experienced attendees brought muffin tins and transported a dozen soup samples at a time to the seating area before digging in. Participants Bruce and his wife Candice have accompanied their daughter Leah to the event. Leah is a hospice social worker whose uninsured patients have benefited from money collected during community events.

“We could write a proposal and tap into [the funds] to purchase things for patients who didn’t have the basics,” she said. She then points to her father, “He’s here to eat soup!” she laughs.

A stack of approximately eight sample cups is a testament to Bruce’s progress. The family is enjoying the culinary adventure but is also taken aback at being in close quarters with other guests. “Given the risk of COVID, this is the most people I’ve been around in three years, and since we’re eating and drinking there are obviously no masks, so I’m trying to stay faced away from as many people as possible,” Leah said.

Candice agrees, “It’s nerve-wracking and it never would have been before.”

Amid greeting new arrivals, Tom Atwood, HPCCR’s Vice President of Philanthropy explains that the previous two events had a different format. “This is our 23<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year

doing this but for the last two, we pivoted to a drive-thru where all these same restaurants, which was tremendous, made their soups but they subdivided them into quart containers and people would purchase online and they would hit the parking circle and we would just go through the window. But it is built for an in-person event.” he said.

Pete Brunnick, CEO of HPCCR agrees that giving people the opportunity to gather and reconnect is important, “A lot of the folks who attend this event have either used our services or they have volunteered for the organization,” he said.

“The proceeds go to a great cause of making sure that we can serve everyone in our community that need our service,” he continued.

“We take the funds that we raise through doing this Soup On Sunday event and it allows us to take care of those who are either underinsured or have no insurance at all,” Brunnick said.

Brunnick joined HPCCR as Chief Financial Officer in the same year as the first Soup On Sunday event and became CEO in 2010. “We’re an independent, not-for-profit competing against for-profit companies that have very deep pockets,” he said.

Since HPCCR is a registered 501(3)(c) organization, quality care is a higher priority than profits, but Brunnick stresses, “We’re really a healthcare company.”

“I like to say we were created by the citizens of the community for the citizens of the community and our commitment is to serve everybody. So, we serve in the toughest neighborhoods, the most vulnerable populations. We make sure that everybody gets excellent care,” he said.

Brunnick glances around the room, gestures to the guests chatting between spoonfuls, the volunteers replenishing supplies and chefs presenting their signature soups.

“You know if we didn’t raise funds, we wouldn’t close our doors, but it would certainly curtail what we want to do.”