

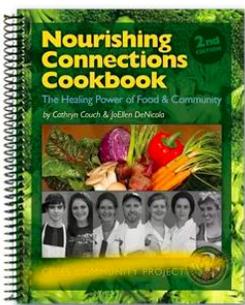
Accelerated Cure Project for MS

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Healing Meals Community Project – “Our Work is Heart Centered, Love Guided”

The [Healing Meals Community Project](#) (HMCP) is a nonprofit organization based in Bloomfield, CT, with a dual mission. They provide healthy, organic meals, free of charge for 14 weeks, to clients and their family members in and around the greater Hartford community who are undergoing treatment for serious illness. Their mission is to not only help clients logistically during a difficult time, but also to teach them through direct experience that organic, nutrient-rich food sustains and supports health. Youth volunteers, ages 14+, play a key role in each step of the process, including food procurement, preparation and packaging. They, too, learn the importance of eating healthy food. Volunteering at HMCP offers them a wealth of other valuable lessons, too, such as teamwork, leadership skills, and helping those in need. According to Sarah Leathers, founder of HMCP, “One could say HMCP is a youth development program that just happens to make beautiful, healthy meals for families in crisis.”



Sarah’s passion for community service and healthy eating clearly runs in the family. In 2007, her sister, Cathryn Couch, founded the [Ceres Community Project](#) (CCP), a nonprofit with an identical mission in California. The inspiration behind CCP came when Cathryn helped a high school girl cook and serve weekly meals to a family struggling with cancer. In Sarah’s words, “She knew that this was something special and she hasn’t stopped cooking since.” Cathryn also developed the [Nourishing Connections Cookbook](#) at that time. This useful book contains many of the recipes that Cathryn created for Ceres clients, as well as a wealth of information about the relationship between what we eat and our health. Since its inception, CCP has provided over 665,000 meals to 3,700 families in Sonoma County, CA. Today, it has [12 affiliates](#) across the country and abroad, many founded by

families that received CCP's generosity and kindness, and wanted to pay it forward. HMCP is one of those affiliates. Sarah shares, "I had my own health crisis and knew the importance of feeding my body the best food to help my immune system. I watched what my sister had developed and knew how important that work was... I knew someday I would start my own organization."

When asked about the importance of a healthy diet, Sarah explains, "When your body is compromised during a health crisis, there are so many things that you don't have control over. One thing you can control is what you choose to put in your mouth. When you give yourself the cleanest, best nutrient-dense food, you're giving your body love and nourishment that is healing. With all the toxins that go with treatment, whether it's chemotherapy, radiation or other medications, your body is constantly fighting those medications and it's looking for something pure and clean to help it fuel."

Meals from HMCP are one hundred percent free of gluten, dairy, corn and soy. According to Sarah, "Those are some of the most common inflammatory foods that we know. We understand that not everyone can live 100%



organic. We educate our clients on the [dirty dozen and the clean fifteen](#). The dirty dozen are the known produce you should stay away from because they're known to have the most pesticides on them. When you're more educated, you can make better choices. We talk to people about eating seasonally. For us in Connecticut, our local food sometimes comes from hundreds of miles away this time of year. If you're eating seasonally, you have a better opportunity to have it come from a closer place. During growing season, we get our produce from a local organic farm, [Holcomb Farm](#) in Granby, CT. It is picked on Tuesday and we are cooking it on Wednesday. It doesn't get better than that. To be able to take something that's picked the day before, cook it and get it to our clients the next day, that's really important."

HMCP provides healthy meals not just to the person that is sick, rather to their whole family. Sarah explains why, "Whether it's the client or the family, they're all in crisis. The spouse or child of someone that is sick is busy caring for the other person, they can't show that they're stressed or in crisis. It's so easy for that family to go down this unhealthy road because all they can think about is everything else they've got going on. It's easy to swing by and pick up a pizza, or a casserole of macaroni and cheese, but that's not going to help sustain them as well during the stress they're going through. We believe in it. We hear it from our clients. We live that way."

Since its inception in 2016, HMCP has had over 500 volunteers help them in their mission, 275 of which have been youth from surrounding towns. On any given week 45-50 volunteers help with a wide variety of activities, from shopping to preparing and delivering meals. With the understanding that family and school come first, youth volunteers are asked to make a 3-month commitment to work alongside adult volunteers. After 50 hours of service, youth volunteers earn their blue apron. After 100 hours of service they earn their chef coat. In the coming year, two youth volunteers will be invited to join HMCP's [Board of Directors](#). When asked about involving teenagers and young adults in their program, Sarah states, "With regards to the youth piece, we truly have a



dual mission... When we start a shift, the kids come in. Their cell phones go in a shoe pocket. They grab their nametag, put on their apron and we come together in a circle before we start. We take a moment to really ground everybody, and then we honor our clients. We read every name of the clients we're serving that week, so there's an opportunity for all of us to think about them during the time that we're cooking or packaging their meals. All of our youth take time out of their shift to write a personal note to a client. It's amazing to go over and be with the kids when they're writing notes and look at the care that goes in to them. Sometimes, these are sixteen-year-old boys who are drawing pictures and writing beautiful notes in hope that they will bring a smile to somebody's face. It's a moment for all of us. I try to go in the kitchen regularly because it fuels my soul. It allows me to take a moment and grounds me in what I'm doing."

The [HMCP team](#) is comprised of ten hard working individuals. Sarah is the only full-time staff person. In her words, "I have an amazing team. My staff dropped out of heaven. Truly they are such a gift. I tell my volunteers and staff all the time that the energy they carry out into the world about what they do at Healing Meals is going to be what moves us forward. It's just been this amazing gift of our community at large believing in us."

HMCP clients and their families have free meals delivered right to their doorstep for 14 weeks. In Sarah's words, "You can't change somebody's way of eating in a week or two. Our long-term goal is to get people to think differently about the food choices they make." Every week clients and their families receive a chicken dish, a fish dish, two vegetarian dishes and a hearty soup. In addition, every client (who is ill) gets a quart of immune broth consisting of organic vegetables with [adaptogenic herbs](#) (known for building the immune system). According to Sarah, "Every week, it's so important for the color, texture, and spices to be different.



When somebody is in a health crisis, many times they're not interested in eating at all, but if they go to the refrigerator and they see our beautiful [sunny beet and carrot burger](#) with beautiful purple and orange color and a side of kale, it looks beautiful." HMCP services are currently offered to clients and their families in 43 towns around the greater Hartford area that are experiencing a health crisis and not receiving hospice care. Sarah states, "We're at capacity right now, cooking and packaging one day a week. In 3 hours on a

Wednesday, we cook over 400 meals." Anyone interested in receiving meals can call Healing Meals Community Project at (860) 431-0507 or email [Emily Safino](#) for more details.

There are many ways to [support](#) this powerful mission. One fun way that brings family and friends together is a [Nourishing Our Neighbors Dinner Party](#). Sarah explains, "I wanted an opportunity to bring people around the table. My mother was a fabulous cook and she loved to entertain. My dad was in sales and frequently brought clients to the house. We were always sitting around the dinner table with clients and friends. I remember that as such a wonderful opportunity to meet people and hear their stories. So, I came up with this idea to do these dinner parties as a fundraiser... We go to someone's house and provide a



four course organic meal that is cooked and presented by our youth. They provide the table and friends to share the meal. Our youth share about HMCP and why they're involved. It's an opportunity for those who know us to share with their friends. It has been an amazing opportunity for us. Our youth have an opportunity to really shine and take on a leadership role, to get up in front of people and talk. I'm always blown away when I hear them introduce themselves, and talk about why they're involved. It truly comes from their heart, and it's different every time."



HMCP has exciting initiatives planned for the future. According to Sarah, "Our focus in 2019 is how to educate the larger community. We're doing eight community dinners working with [Cigna](#), which is really exciting... We've just launched a partnership with [Whole Foods](#). The three Connecticut stores, two in West Hartford and one in Glastonbury, are now selling five of our recipes. Whole Foods is making, packaging and selling the recipes, and a dollar for every pound sold will benefit HMCP... We're also planning to do small cooking classes for clients and their families, through a grant from the Love of Amy Foundation. We'll be bringing a couple of families together, cooking with them, helping them to see how easy it is to cook healthy and then sitting down at the table together."

HMCP also has a small organic garden that they hope to expand in the coming year. Sarah states, "The [Connecticut Valley Garden Club](#) will be working alongside our youth this spring, summer and fall to grow our own organic garden. The kids will be able to plant, pick, weed, bring it into the kitchen, cook it, package it and out it goes. They'll be able to say all of it is from us."

When asked what she enjoys most about HMCP, Sarah shares, "I love receiving a note of gratitude from a client and sharing it with our youth so they can see that they have a profound impact in the lives of those in our community. I love watching a young person come into our community for the first time, nervous, unsure about where they fit in the puzzle, and seeing the other youth welcome them openly. By the end of the shift they have new friends. I love the energy and the culture we have created." When asked what her biggest challenge has been, she states, "We have grown so quickly and have many organizations that want to align with us and we are learning to evaluate what makes sense for our organization."

Sarah's daughter, [Samantha](#), was diagnosed with MS two years ago. This news rocked their family. Reflecting on this difficult time, Sarah shares, "There was definitely denial at first... We immediately changed her diet, removing the most inflammatory foods. When she had her second flare up we had her do a [FIT test](#) which revealed her intolerance to a number of foods that she was eating on a regular basis that were causing inflammation... She is nothing but amazing and courageous. Samantha sees the good, always the good, and puts that out to the world every day... I don't try and tell Sam how to feel about her diagnosis but I do remind her that she has a supportive family, and don't focus on the diagnosis. Try not to let it fill your head with what could be, instead be present and grateful for today."

The good work that HMCP does has a ripple effect, not only in the lives of the clients they serve, but also in the lives of their youth volunteers. Their clients and their families receive nourishment for the body and soul, and their youth volunteers learn lessons that go far beyond food preparation and delivery. Their eyes are opened to

their neighbors in need and compassion for them is fostered. Reflecting on her remarkable journey with HMCP, Sarah shares, “At this point in my life, to be able to wake up every day and be excited about what I’m doing is such a gift. It’s a labor of love. There are many late nights and long, long days, but I don’t feel like that. I feel like this is such a gift I’ve been given and my role is to shepherd this out and get everybody who works and volunteers alongside me to feel that same thing.”

