Beyond the Dining Hall

Located in Barton Hall, Gather is a non-profit food pantry that offers "innovative programs that build food security."

**Victoria Fluet, Contributing Writer**

Emily Gaddis is a big fan of chopping potatoes. The thud of knife on cutting board echoes in the steel-gray, sun-filled kitchen of Barton Hall. That love of cooking, down to its most (supposedly) dull parts, is what drew Gaddis to Gather.

Founded at Strawberry Banke in 1816 to support fishermen’s families, Gather’s mission is “to offer innovative programs that build food security in welcoming and dignified ways.” They work towards this goal with multiple different programs throughout the Seacoast. Their Pantry Market in Portsmouth offers a supermarket-like experience with free food and personal care items. Their Mobile Markets – refrigerated box trucks with veggies screen printed on the side – drive to underserved communities with other goods. Meals for Kids focuses on feeding school-age children during breaks. Gaddis spent seventeen years with the Maine School Administration District 60 School Nutrition program in Maine- twelve as a manager – for a kindergarten through third-grade school, before joining Gather.

Another pillar of Gather’s work is gleaning, which is collecting excess food from farmers and sellers to give to those in need. Gaddis began with this team as the Gleaning Coordinator. But, due to the wide range of people to work with and the large area to travel, she had very little structure, which she didn’t enjoy. She gave her two-week resignation notice at a Mobile Market, to which her Gather supervisor said, “you’re not allowed to quit; give me a couple of days, and we’ll realign you.” He then offered Gaddis her current role, which leads to the kitchen we’re cooking home fries in now: the University of New Hampshire Project Coordinator.

Gather’s UNH kitchen is in Barton Hall; their work in Durham focuses on the college student population. While not discussed as frequently as other demographics, food insecurity is common in college. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, roughly one in three college students experiences food insecurity as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Beyond the physical and emotional toll, it can also affect classroom performance.
In a textbook example of killing two birds with one stone, Gaddis’s team sources much of the ingredients they cook with from UNH Dining and Catering. Catering is a huge food source, as estimating the amount of food needed is difficult. The catering team will prepare for a certain number of guests, Gaddis shares, but a hundred faculty getting breakfast and a hundred hockey players at dinner leave radically different amounts of leftovers. Dining’s donations are a mix of prepped food and food the culinary team ordered and decided against putting into rotation (a recent shipment included vegan kelp meatballs). Gather’s kitchen will take that food, prepare it, and portion it out. Gaddis then sends it to the campus food pantry, Cat’s Cupboard. The typical shipment is two boxes of meals, soups, sides and two boxes of treats. The balance goes to Gather’s pantry market in Portsmouth.

“It’s almost always a hybrid between [UNH dining/catering sourced] food and our food. Some of these.” Gaddis gestured to their growing pile of potatoes. “will go with French toast that they donated to me. They froze it, and I’ll cook [the potatoes] with sausage links or bacon with it, and now it’s a little breakfast-dinner for people.”

In the previous year, Gather’s two kitchens (their second kitchen is at Great Bay Community College) made nearly 60,000 meals, sides and desserts. That workload requires many hands which, in a non-profit’s case, means volunteers. A core part of Gaddis’s role is coordinating students and Durham residents who want to support Gather’s work; it’s what drew her to the position. The result is a kitchen where volunteer enjoyment is as important as the end product.

“I try to get to know my volunteers as well,” Gaddis said. “What do you want to do? Do you just want to decompress with a really simple job? Or do you want to learn to cook? Some of them don’t know how to cook, so I’m doing a lot of teaching. Some of them are already pretty good cooks or really good cooks, so I might just say, ‘go make something.’ If they come in regularly, what do you want to make? I’ll order the stuff, and we can make that.”

Isabel Cole is one of the longest-running Gather volunteers – and, on this particular day, a fellow potato chopper. A fourth-year Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems major with minors in History and Native American/Indigenous Studies, Cole discovered Gather in the spring of her second year at UNH.

“I was really unsure in the kitchen,” Cole confessed. “I’d grown up cooking with my mom and sister, but they were always the main chefs, and I’d just chop stuff. But I came, and Emily is the reason I’m here because we’d have great conversations. This was my safe space, my home, on campus.”

Now, Cole carries her cooking confidence into other projects on campus. She hosts community dinners with the Waysmeet Center, a direct service nonprofit. She credits her experience at Gather as a significant part of her newfound respect for cooking.

“College is a time you should be getting the best nutrition,” Cole argued. “Think about it: it’s the first time you’re alone as a young adult, and you are trying to provide yourself food for the first time. If you create habits that are eating ramen all the time, or like you were talking about earlier, only doing prepared food, you’re not going to learn really important skills that are really important for your development. I mean, I know the difference between when I wake up for an 8 a.m. and I don’t eat before and when I wake up for an 8 a.m. and I eat before.”

Gaddis and Cole agreed that supporting college students differs from other demographics. One area they noted was funding. Gather is largely supported by donations and if their donors are unaware about the prevalence of college food insecurity – or have other areas they want to focus on – the UNH team feels the effects.

“Donors love kids,” Gaddis said. “Some people just give us money and say ‘here it is,’ and some people are giving us money for programs specifically. Kids are always the most popular thing to be supported.”

There’s also the matter of people using the resources. Gather’s number of meals made is always increasing, but it still likely doesn’t reach the number of students who would benefit from them. Cole wonders if this might be partially due to normalization. The stereotype of the broke college kid surviving on ramen is prevalent and harmful.

“There’s a pretty big stigma around food inaccess and what that even looks like,” she said. “There’s probably a lot of students that wouldn’t consider themselves to be needing a pantry, they just kind of get by because that’s kind of what they were taught. They weren’t taught to get help or ask for help.”
The potatoes finish roasting. Cole portions them out along with a quiche Gaddis made with gleaned veggies. It’s a delicious-smelling, hearty portion of a win-win-win scenario: a meal for a person in need, food given a second life, and a fulfilling volunteer experience on campus.

“I wonder sometimes if even though we have those numbers and statistics, if people actually know – or if they want to know,” Gaddis mused while talking. “Because to know [more about food insecurity on campus] might mean facing that maybe the system we have here isn’t quite as good as we think.”