



# Hungry to Help

The idea was simple. Collect extra food and share it with those in need. Implementing that idea, however, took time, talent, and toughness. That's where **Louisa Polos '08** stepped in, working long and hard to create a Campus Kitchen program on the Gettysburg campus.

BY KENDRA MARTIN

The idea first began to germinate in the fall of 2004, when Polos enrolled in Prof. Chris Fee's first-year seminar on homelessness and poverty in America. Polos and her classmates read a dozen books and each logged more than 20 hours of local community service. They also went on a service-learning trip to Washington, D.C., spending a weekend and their fall-term "reading days" living in a homeless shelter and working with a variety of social-service organizations.

For Polos, the experience was transformational. "I had no idea how intense this seminar course would be," she said. "It truly was a life-changing weekend for me in D.C., thinking about the core issues of homelessness and poverty in America and how I might bring change to my new community."

## An idea takes form

During her Washington trip, Polos spent four days working at D.C. Central Kitchen (DCCCK) — a non-profit organization that began in 1989, when it distributed excess food from the Presidential inauguration to the needy. Today, DCCCK collects more than a ton of surplus food a day from restaurants and hotels and turns it into 4,000 meals for the hungry in greater Washington, D.C.

At DCCCK, Polos learned about an initiative called the Campus Kitchens Project, which is similar to DCCCK in that it works to "recycle" excess food. In this case, however, college students collect food from campus dining halls, restaurants, and grocery stores and repurpose it as healthy meals for community members. Food is definitely available to collect. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans waste 30 million tons of food a year. Recovering just five percent feeds four million people daily.

When Polos was in Washington, only a handful of Campus Kitchens existed across the country. Polos was determined that Gettysburg College

would have the next one. "As soon as I heard about Campus Kitchens, I knew it was a program we could do," she said. Returning to campus, she set out to turn her idea into a reality.



Louisa Polos '08

Alexander Armster-Wikoff '03

## Laying the groundwork

Dedication to service most certainly motivated Polos. "One of the things immediately notable about Louisa as a first-year student was her energy and high level of passion," Fee said. "She was into lots of different activities on campus, but she was also very dedicated to service. For example, she recognized one of the authors from our reading list as someone she had met before and heard speak while working with the Midnight Run program in New York. It was clear that she had a long-term interest in service."

During her first year Polos began laying the groundwork for a Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg. She talked with numerous people on campus and became involved in the College's Center for Public Service (CPS). Her sophomore year she served as a teaching assistant for Fee's homelessness course, something she would continue doing the next two years.

Momentum for the new initiative grew when Polos spent a summer in Washington, D.C., at the Fund for

American Studies Institute on Philanthropy and Voluntary Service. There, she examined economic concepts, political systems, and moral philosophy. She also interned at DCCCK, where she discovered that Campus Kitchens was looking to expand. Given the College's long-standing history of service, DCCCK was interested in partnering with Gettysburg. Hearing that, Polos knew she wanted to establish a Campus Kitchen in her junior year.

## Overcoming challenges

When Polos returned to campus in the fall of 2006, she was charged by DCCCK to complete a feasibility study on the possibility of setting up a Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg. Working closely with College staff at CPS, she gathered statistics and answered questions on student commitment to service, strength of community partnerships, and space on campus to house the kitchen. All seemed well until Polos encountered a major challenge — finding space for a Campus Kitchen.

Over the past several years the student body at Gettysburg has increased by several hundred, but the food preparation area in the dining hall has remained the same size. Polos and Gary Brautigam, director of dining services, tried to clear space, but nothing worked. They even tried to figure out if there were times when the dining hall was not busy. Perhaps a Campus Kitchen could function during those hours. In the end, nothing worked.

"We were receptive and open to the project, but we just didn't have the space they needed," Brautigam said. "Campus Kitchens has some specific requirements, which include a certain amount of square footage, open counter and cooking space, and refrigeration and freezer needs. Much as we wanted to, we just didn't have the space."

"It was a difficult time," Polos said. "We couldn't find room in the

dining hall. We would just have to think outside the box if this was going to happen.”

Polos first inquired about possible space in the Science Center. She even checked out kitchens in the fraternity houses and residence halls. No place on campus met the square footage requirements and none could be adequately sanitized for cooking. It was starting to look as if a Campus Kitchen was not in the future for Gettysburg College.

#### Problem solved

Polos doesn't give up easily, even when a problem seems impossible. If nothing was available on campus, then perhaps she could find something in town. Asking around, she learned that the local social service agency, South Central Community Action Program (SCCAP), had an unused commercial kitchen in a building near campus. Polos approached Megan Shreve, executive director of SCCAP, to see if something could be worked out.

SCCAP was willing to help, but there remained the fact that the building was off campus. “Initially, the regional supervisor for Campus Kitchens said that our facility had to be on campus,” Polos said. “But when she learned that SCCAP is only two

blocks from campus and that we already had a strong community partnership through previous work with the Center for Public Service, she agreed to give it a try.”

Everything was coming together at last. “Even while we were brainstorming the possibilities and working out the logistics, we knew that this was

“Louisa Polos’ drive and motivation, coupled with the campus and community partnerships that the Center for Public Service has built over the last 15 years, made it possible for the Campus Kitchen project to grow so quickly and be so sustainable.”

going to be an amazing partnership,” Shreve said. “We are really fortunate to work so closely with Campus Kitchen and happy to have them using our kitchen, which was previously under-utilized. It seemed like a no-brainer to let them use the kitchen.”

#### Getting started

Although the new Campus Kitchen would be located off campus, the College’s dining hall remained involved. Brautigam and staff committed all extra or left-over foods to be donated solely to the Campus Kitchen, making them the kitchen’s

primary and steady supplier of food. They also offered food preparation and culinary training sessions for student volunteers. And they helped Polos purchase a new commercial refrigerator and other needed supplies for the SCCAP kitchen, which was funded by a grant she co-authored to assist with start-up costs.

“We learned how to be the kind of volunteer that the Campus Kitchen needed,” Brautigam said. “It’s common in our kitchen to hear someone say, ‘Save that. It’s going to Campus Kitchen.’”

With location and a food source finally in place, the Campus Kitchen was ready to open in the fall of 2007. Even so, there were still a great many things left to do and time was running out if Polos was to see the Campus Kitchen up and running before she graduated a semester early in December.

Before Campus Kitchen could open, several pantry items needed to be purchased. To stock the shelves, a campus-wide food drive collected several tons of dried and canned food. Sigma Chi fraternity stepped up as a supporter, making the kitchen their sole philanthropic partner for both fundraising and volunteering. And the Gettysburg community got involved as well, with support in both food and funds coming from local restaurants and stores.

Finally, after months of hard work, the moment arrived and Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg College opened on Nov. 15. Three weeks later, Polos graduated and received her B.A. degree with a major in political science and a minor in English.

With tears in her voice, Polos remembered that day when her idea had become complete reality. “I was standing there at the kickoff event and it was so meaningful to have everyone there,” she said. “People from D.C. Central Kitchen, Campus Kitchens, CPS, SCCAP, the dining hall, my first-year seminar course, and Professor Fee. I’m remembering back to when I was a first-year student and didn’t know any of this. Now I was about to graduate, and we had done it. We brought a Campus Kitchen to Gettysburg. It is a reflection of Gettysburg’s character and integrity.”

#### A special legacy

Of course, the Campus Kitchen is also testimony to Polos’ character, and many see that she has left her own legacy at the College.

“Sometimes projects like this fade when a particular student graduates,” Brautigam said. “There just isn’t enough interest from others to sustain them. But this has held strong, and I think it will for a long time. The Campus Kitchen is working so well and there are a dedicated group of students who are continuing the great work.”

Fee agrees wholeheartedly. “Louisa saw that there was no reason this shouldn’t happen,” he said. “A tenacious spirit pushed her to do something that needed to be done. And now others are carrying on her work.”

In just over a year of operation, Campus Kitchen has already made an incredible impact in the Gettysburg community. Students have volunteered more than 750 hours, recovered 3,500 lbs. of food, and served 1,385 meals to community groups with the Adams County Office for Aging, YWCA Single Mother’s Support Group, and Adams County Circles Initiative which engages the community in helping families move out of poverty. The Campus Kitchen has also helped several community organizations put their time and resources toward their missions.

“Not only has Campus Kitchen saved our programs a substantial amount of money, but the students who prepare the meals have been so supportive of our program partici-

pants,” Shreve said. “They bring more than just a meal to our organization, they bring a relationship, too.”

That’s making a difference. One meal at a time. One student at a time. ■

#### Four active years

Campus Kitchen wasn’t all that kept Polos busy at Gettysburg. She was a member of both Delta Gamma and Alpha Phi Omega, a co-ed service fraternity. She also worked as a coordinator at CPS for three years; and participated in a service-learning trip to New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina clean-up in March 2006. She received a \$10,000 Projects for Peace grant, which she co-authored with two students and used to help fund the Campus Kitchen.

Off campus, Polos spent a summer as an intern at the Fund for American Studies Institute on Philanthropy and Voluntary Service in Washington, D.C., and volunteered regularly at DCKK. She also interned at public relations firms in New York and Washington.

Polos received many College awards and accolades, including the Mildred G. Hartzell Award for Greek Life Senior Woman of the Year in 2008, Gettysburg College Student Life Award in 2007, Ingrid Easton Visionary Award from Campus Kitchens Project at Gettysburg in 2007, Delta Gamma Sisterhood Award for Outstanding Junior in 2007, Order of Omega from the Greek Honors Society in 2007, and the Silent Leader Award from CPS in 2006.

Following graduation in December 2007, Polos received the national 2008 Theta Chapter of Delta Gamma Collegiate Leadership Award — in her honor a \$1,000 scholarship was given to a Delta Gamma collegian and \$3,000 went to a philanthropic organization of her choice. She gave \$2,000 to the Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg College and \$1,000 to the national Campus Kitchens Project to assist with start-up costs.

Since leaving Gettysburg, Polos has been working in New York City at A&E Television Networks. She plans to move to Washington, D.C., to pursue a career in nonprofit work.

#### Already growing

The Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg College is up and running — and already growing. This past year CPS received a three-year AmeriCorps VISTA position, allowing it to enhance community outreach and program development.

The Campus Kitchen has also found ways to increase its food resources through “gleaning,” or picking leftover produce from local fields after harvest. This gleaning has yielded hundreds of pounds of corn and apples. Extra produce has also been collected from the Adams County Farmers’ Market on the square in Gettysburg. Volunteers preserve and freeze the produce for future use.

Nutrition is a critical component of Campus Kitchen, and meals consist of a protein, starch, and vegetable. The program hopes to attract more community partners that offer fresh, healthy foods, and possibly some organic items. The Campus Kitchen also hopes to increase its partnership with the College’s Painted Turtle Farm, located in the northwest corner of campus. Additional nutrition-based education programs for community members is a future goal.

Other plans include a possible partnership with the Adams County Office on Aging to offer support and fill in the gaps for existing programs such as Meals on Wheels. Offering a culinary arts training program for the community is another idea. Campus Kitchen would also like to work with Healthy Adams County to provide a needs assessment about food access and nutrition in the community.