

Bounty & Soul celebrates five years of bringing health and happiness to the community

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Bounty & Soul founder and director of programs, Ali Casparian, welcome people to the weekly market at St. James Episcopal Church on Aug. 6. (Photo: Fred McCormick)

Ali Casparian had a clear vision when she began offering carefully arranged fresh produce to anyone who needed it: "No one hungry. Everyone healthy."

As Bounty & Soul prepares to celebrate its fifth anniversary at Native Kitchen & Social Pub at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 28, those words still guide the Black Mountain-based nonprofit while its efforts to create a healthier community continue to expand.

The concept of Bounty & Soul, which has distributed around 1.4 million pounds of produce and whole grains to nearly 150,000 people since it was incorporated as a nonprofit on Aug. 28, 2014, began to take shape in 2012 at the Welcome Table at St. James Episcopal Church.

"The impetus was my own food insecurity at the time," Casparian said. "I had just moved into the area and found it difficult to get a job and was struggling to find good, healthy food."

She began volunteering at the Welcome Table, which dissolved in 2013, after eating a meal there. She noticed something during her first visit to MANNA FoodBank.

"There were huge amounts of produce stored there and a lot of it would rot and eventually go out to pig farmers," Casparian said. "They were doing their best to get it out to pantries, but (food pantry) models are set up to get mostly shelf-stable food to people."

A week later, Casparian collected the produce from MANNA and brought it to St. James.

"I wanted to set up tables like you would find in a farmer's market," she said. "That was always the intention of it; I wanted it to be beautiful because there is integrity and dignity and respect when everything is presented that way. I felt like I deserved to experience that but I couldn't experience it at the time, and I wanted that for other people in my situation."



Adam Kelly, right, the food sourcing and volunteer coordinator for Bounty & Soul, works with a volunteer during the Aug. 6 market at St. James Episcopal Church. (Photo: Fred McCormick)

The concept was something the community was "ready for," according to Casparian. The healthy food continues to be available to anyone who needs it, no questions asked.

"That's why it took off," she said. "People were literally hungry for it and we had volunteers right away and one table quickly became three tables and then five tables. The community really embraced it right away."

Volunteers are still a crucial component of the organization's work today. Nearly 13,000 volunteers have contributed over 43,000 hours of their time supporting Bounty & Soul, according to Bruce Ganger, who stepped in as the executive director in September 2016.

"Bounty & Soul could not operate without its volunteer base," Ganger said. "Those volunteers, through their work with us, have generated more than \$1.1 million in community impact. We have a core group of a little over 200 volunteers who we draw on every week. When we need them, they respond."

Mary Soyenova has been volunteering at Bounty & Soul since the beginning.

"It's made a huge difference in my life," she said. "I live on Social Security, so this organization is wonderful. I can come here for five or six hours and help out and then go home with \$100 worth of fruits and vegetables. I'm so grateful."

Soyenova spends every Tuesday at St. James, which hosts one of Bounty & Soul's five weekly markets in the Swannanoa Valley. Public markets are also held at Owen Middle School on Thursday evenings and Black Mountain Presbyterian Church on Friday evenings. Markets are also held on Mondays for residents of the Blue Ridge Apartments and on Tuesdays for parents of children who attend the Children and Friends Enrichment Center.



"Everything comes in cardboard boxes and we take everything out and arrange it in a way that's beautiful and colorful," she said. "We could put it out in cardboard boxes, but that's not what Bounty & Soul is all about. It's about building a community."

Fostering that environment is key to Bounty & Soul's efforts, which go well beyond food distribution.

"One of the first grants we wrote, which we received from the Black Mountain-Swannanoa Valley Endowment Fund, was for cooking equipment," Casparian said. "That enabled us to have cooking demonstrations and the (Rooted in Health) classes."

The demonstrations and classes are offered before the distribution of food at each market.

"My vision was to do more than provide food," said Casparian, who earned a certification as a Health and Wellness coach from the Institute of Integrative Nutrition and became an Advanced Food-Healing Certified Instructor through the Supreme Science Qi Gong Center. "It was also apparent early on that the needs weren't just about food and people's physical being, it was also about their emotional being. We all struggle with anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness and we can't talk about health if we don't talk about those other things."

Bounty & Soul employs a "whole-person model," that seeks to connect participants while empowering them to live happy and fulfilling lives. Programs offered through the organization include wellness classes, coaching and free yoga.

The approach is unique and drew Ganger to Bounty & Soul.

"Ali is magical at doing what she does," he said. "When I came aboard it was really Ali, (director of community engagement) Karla Gardner and a part-time truck driver and that was it. We set about figuring out how to get a more consistent funding stream and plan."

The pioneers of Bounty & Soul "knew they had something," Ganger said.

"What they sensed in the impact Ali's program and vision were having, was that people wanted this," he said. "It became incumbent on us to continue to refine it, better define it and go into the community and ask what is working and what's not."

As the needs of the community continue to evolve, the organization is in regular conversation with the medical community, according to Casparian.

"We are in partnership with MAHEC and we engage with their residency program," she said. "Lifestyle medicine is the future of health care and they don't teach nutrition, mindfulness or stress management in medical school. We have an opportunity for this next generation of doctors to be exposed to this culture of health. Not that western medicine needs to be thrown out, but these concepts can be integrated into it."

TaTanisha Davis was already on a "weight-loss journey" when she learned about Bounty & Soul.



TaTanisha Davis looks through a basket of peppers at St. James Episcopal Church in Black Mountain, where Bounty & Soul holds one of its five weekly markets. Davis first came to the market in February of 2018 in an effort to reach her weight-loss goal and improve her quality of life. (Photo: Fred McCormick)

"I was at a standstill and I couldn't lose any more weight," she said. "I was working with a lady from Mission Hospital and she reached out to Bounty & Soul."

Davis learned about the benefits of a plant-based diet and immediately began to feel a difference.

"Every two weeks I would lose a couple of pounds through dietary changes," she said. "I started off small. I gave up dairy products first, then the chips and diet soda and the weight started coming off again."

Davis started participating in Bounty & Soul in February 2018, and by November she reached her goal.

"I'd been carrying a lot of extra skin for 30-something years," she said. "My goal was to have that skin removed, and that was why I started trying to lose weight. I had to be at 195 pounds before I could have the procedure and I was at 235 pounds when I started Bounty & Soul. They helped me reach my goal."

Impressed by the work of the organization, Davis was eager to utilize the extra energy she had to volunteer. She leads the Kids' Healthy Cooking & Activities class at the St. James market every Tuesday.

"The kids make a healthy dish," she said. "Today we're making cucumber salsa, and it's all very hands-on. We do different activities, like planting plants and physical activities."

The experience has had a major impact on Davis.

"It's been life-changing and exciting," she said. "I'm in a happier place because I met my goal and I have almost a new body. It makes me more optimistic about my future."

Stories like the one told by Davis, who comes to the market from Asheville, have become increasingly common at Bounty & Soul through the years, Ganger said.

"We have physicians who are now literally writing prescriptions, and instead of writing the name of a drug on the pad, they write 'Bounty & Soul,'" he said. "We have people coming to our markets who are introduced to our program, food and resources by their doctors."

Bounty & Soul is now reaching over 850 people per week, according to Ganger. Their markets are open 51 weeks each year.

"We source and distribute over 12,000 pounds of food each week," he said. "The lines continue to grow and we see new faces at each one of our markets. It's a model that has been able to scale to meet the needs of this community."

Other communities are taking notice of what Bounty & Soul is doing, Ganger said.

"We're now having conversations with eight counties that surround Buncombe that are looking at starting similar programs," he said. "We had a group in Billings, Montana, that reached out to us that was looking to do what we were doing, and we were the closest organization they could find to help guide them."

However, as the needs of the community continue to grow, Ganger finds the nonprofit "chasing" them. Bounty & Soul added four employees in January, bringing its total to six, in an effort to keep up with demand.

"As of the end of June of this year we'd already seen a 20 percent increase over 2018," he said. "In 2018 we saw the need increase by 30 percent over 2017. So we have this pull from the community and we've had to go out and source more food."

Bounty & Soul partners with area farms and gardens, like the Dr. John Wilson Community Garden in Black Mountain, to support the demand.

"We have an active program called the Farmer's Alliance Program where we are out talking to farmers and growers," Ganger said. "We suggest that they plant a row for Bounty & Soul. They want the food that they're growing to be used and go to a good cause, so any food that comes out of the ground that's not retail quality becomes a donation possibility for us."

Five years after its incorporation, the growth of Bounty & Soul has been "phenomenal," according to Ganger, but as the organization looks to the future there is still work to be done.

"We need to address the financial viability of the organization," he said. "We're working hard to expand and solidify that. We expect we'll continue to see organic growth."

The fundraiser at the Native Kitchen & Social Pub, one of Bounty & Soul's many community partners, will give those in attendance an opportunity to learn more about the organization. Casparian and Ganger will share the organization's story during the event, which will include anecdotes from people whose lives have been impacted by its work. Tickets are \$125 per person.

"We are expanding our community engagement," Ganger said. "We're asking people who may know about us, but don't know exactly what we do, to come and learn more about us."

Winfred Shytle is a 93-year-old World War II veteran who has been attending Bounty & Soul's market since it began. While the fresh produce and learning what to do with what he brings home from the market are "wonderful," he said, the organization has done much more than provide him with food.



World War II Veteran Winfred Shytle, who turned 93 on July 23, has been attending Bounty & Soul markets since 2012. He credits founder Ali Casparian and the nonprofit organization's programs with helping him live a happier and healthier life. (Photo: Fred McCormick)

"I have no arthritis, no rheumatism, no diabetes," said Shytle, who also participates in yoga classes.

Shytle, who attends church at St. James, began coming to the markets in 2012. Having lost his wife in 2010, he was struggling on his own.

"Ali was so wonderful," he said, choking back tears. "After my wife passed away I didn't want to be happy. Ali told me: 'Winfred, you're going to have to change,' and I did. I was making myself sick."

Bounty and Soul helped renew his understanding of healthy living.

"You have to strive to be happy and adjust to what's going on around you," he said. "I've met so many wonderful people through this organization and those friendships have helped me be happy and healthy."

Reaching people through understanding while caring about them unconditionally is a big part of the success of Bounty & Soul, according to Casparian.

"We meet people where they are with no judgment," she said. "You walk in those doors and you know you are welcome and have nothing to be ashamed of. It's hard enough to be in a situation where you are in need, but we're all in need of something and we are working to meet those needs."

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