



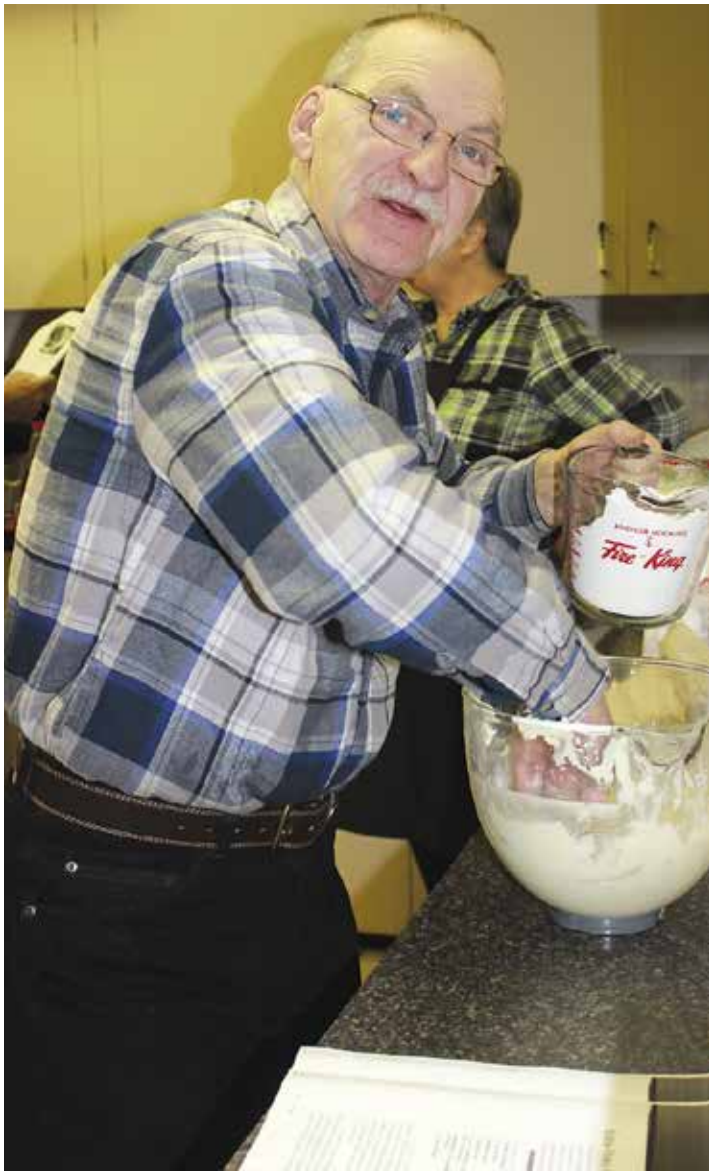
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Men gather for cooking, conversation and companionship



Lori Larsen, Camrose Booster

Members of the Hospice Society of Camrose Men's Cooking Circle gathered at the Open Door kitchen to assemble some sweet treats. Pictured in front is Rick Picher, fearlessly stirring a mixture for homemade shortbread.

By Lori Larsen

Many a problem has been solved around a kitchen table; many a conversation has been had. People gather there for a common purpose, to enjoy a meal and engage in conversation where one feels connected and safe.

The Hospice Society of Camrose and District in partnership with Alberta Health Services and community facilitators has taken that concept and has turned it into a successful and empowering initiative for Camrose and area men who are, in some way, experiencing grief.

"The genesis of this initiative (Men's Cooking Circle) was particularly about widowed men and these prairie guys who, maybe never learned to cook," said Hospice Society of Camrose and District grief and bereavement coordinator Bill Harder. "We offer them a chance

to come together and gain some cooking skills and, at the same time, learn nutrition from our dietician and give them a chance to talk about what it is like to be widowed."

Harder approached Eva Lynn (Dinner Diva) a year previous, about the possibility of beginning the program. "She liked the idea and was willing to be a cooking instructor," said Harder. Along with Lynn's business partner Judy Haselwood, the two volunteered to come on board.

"Then we got hold of Jocelyn Armstrong, dietician from Alberta Health Services and her department was willing to fund her being involved as a dietician."

The goal to begin the program in the spring of this year was temporarily sidetracked after discovering there were not enough men interested. "In the fall, I spoke with Clar-

ence Hastings from CDSS (Camrose District Support Services). He runs the Men's Shed, and I asked if any of the Men's Shed guys would be interested in the cooking program.

"They all wanted to do it. We ended up with eight men signed up," smiled Harder. "Two of them are widows, one is going through a divorce and the rest are dealing with various types of grief in their lives."

While originally planned for widowers, the program has since opened up to include men experiencing any form of grief.

"It has been immensely positive for us all," added Harder. "It is an incredible experience. There are great cooking skills being learned and lots of really good conversation."

The group met once a week for seven weeks in the kitchen area below The Open Door at around 6 p.m.

"We began by sitting around the table and chit chatting. We would get our

projects assigned, then we just started cooking."

The first few sessions included the basics of cooking, eventually working up to more complex meals and cooking. The men in the group were given the opportunity to select the meals, all of which included healthy, fresh and balanced choices, including a night of fish (salmon cakes and chowder with baking powder biscuits), a night for Italian dishes (pasta) and an all-in favourite night of ribs and lentils. On this, the last night, the men were scurrying around the kitchen, with the help of Eva, Judy and Jocelyn, preparing a variety of heavenly-smelling desserts.

"We have cooked some fantastic meals," remarked Harder. "Then we sit down and eat together, chit chat about our grief, signs of grief, what it is like for men to grieve and how they experience it uniquely and what have they done for support."

After sharing food and companionship, the group cleans the kitchen and departs. "When all is said and done, we have been there for about three hours and received some really good information all the way around."

To the best of his knowledge and as a result of some extensive internet research, Harder believes this is a one-of-a-kind program with only a few similar initiatives existing, including a short-term one in Ontario offered by a church, one in the United States and one in Australia as an extension of the health system.

"This is a pilot project unique to Canadian hospice." But one that Harder, along with others dealing in grief work in the community, felt was vital. "We wondered what to do about guys who are home alone and are eating macaroni every night because they don't know enough about cooking."

Most of the men in this particular group were retired and grieving the loss of a relationship and came to the group with virtually no cooking experience.

Group member Neil Leeson spoke about the program. "Since I retired, I have the time and I want to be able to do my share of the cooking with my partner."

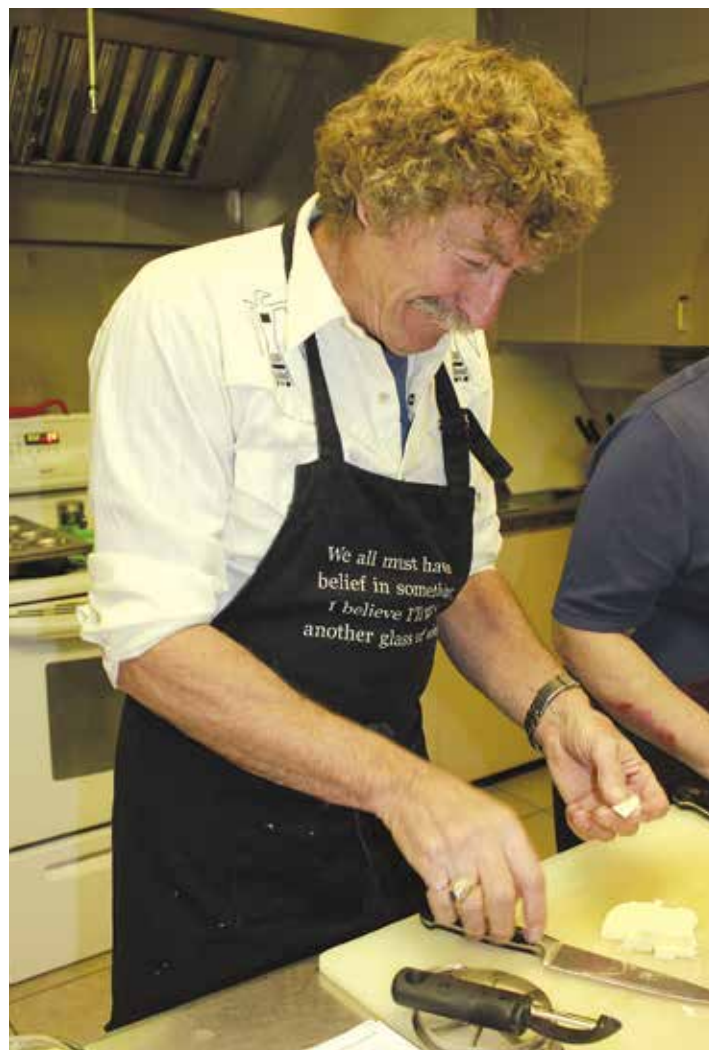
"It is also about getting together with a group that you see every week and sharing ideas and thoughts of what is going on in our lives. It is important to have that," he said as he sliced and diced apples for an apple crisp.

"I wanted to give it a try. I am part of the Men's Shed and this is an extension of getting together and talking."

The program also included a grocery store tour, cooking instructions and tips and nutritional information supplied by Armstrong.

Harder indicated an intention to continue the program next year in hopes of reaching even more men who may be bereaving loss in their lives.

For more information on the Men's Cooking Circle or grief or bereavement, contact Bill Harder at bill@insidewise.com.



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Neil Leeson cuts butter into pieces for his take on apple crisp, during the Men's Cooking Circle's last session of this year. The program is designed to give Camrose and area men, who may be grieving a loss, an opportunity to come together, learn some cooking tips, cook and converse.