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HOMETOWN HEROES

Kristi Bridgers Helped Create a Safe Haven for Oxford with More Than a Meal

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY JAKE THOMPSON

More Than a Meal serves to help the Oxford and Lafayette County community, but at the same time it is saving **Kristi Bridgers**.

Founded in 2010, More Than a Meal does exactly what the name says. It provides meals, of course, but the nonprofit's main mission was to provide toiletries, education, and food supplies.

The organization was a result of a task force put together by then-Oxford mayor Richard Howarth. Bridgers was one of the task force members, and the idea for More Than a Meal came from realizing that, outside of The Pantry, there were not a lot of other options for meals for families and children in need.

Bridgers and her family moved back to Oxford in 2005 and noticed the lack of food supply locations.

"There was not a hot meal (option), and I think the real catalyst, when I think back, was my kids," Bridgers said. "Because we would go on a mission trip to Mexico and we came back and my kids were like, 'Why don't we do that all the time?'"

Howarth charged the task force to look at the Oxford community and identify its immediate needs. Along with More Than a Meal, other nonprofits came out of the task force brainstorm, including Doors of Hope.

Taking a closer examination of the community showed Bridgers she could take care of two needs while using her expertise, being an education major from the University of Mississippi.

"Basically, I had this idea of having this hot meal and tutoring kids," Bridgers said. "So, that was important, and then just the lack of toiletries — and, boy, didn't we need it during COVID."

In the early years of More Than a Meal, it would "bounce around" from St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church and other locations.

"Basically any church that would have us," Bridgers said.

In the now 16 years the program has been around, it has grown and received continuous support from the LOU community. Ole Miss athletics plays a big role, with athletes and staff members lending their support every Tuesday to help serve meals and



spend time with those who could use some fellowship.

For Bridgers, it became a safe harbor for herself. She has been sober for four years, and after getting out of rehab, the first place she wanted to be was helping at More Than a Meal.

"When I came back, the safest place I wanted to go was More Than a Meal. Because it's real and it's honest," Bridgers said.

The desire to be a helping force in the Oxford community is something Bridgers traces back to her childhood and watching her grandparents while growing up in Meridian.

Being farmers allowed Bridgers to see the world of growing and supplying food to provide not just for her family, but for neighbors and even strangers.

"I think they imprinted that on me at an early age," Bridgers said. "Like, 'What we have is yours and we're going to help.' ... There were always people at their table, and food has always been a part of my life. I think walls come down when you're eating together and you can share a meal. I feel like what God has given me, I have to give back."

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