

The biggest family in town belongs to Isaiah 61 Cafe

By ADAM DRAPCHO
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

LACONIA — Isaiah 61 Cafe was opened to give homeless people a place they could feel welcome and where they could find basic necessities such as food, showers and laundry facilities. As they celebrated its one-year anniversary on June 20, founders Dave and Dawn Longval said that by opening their doors, they also gained a sense of purpose and family.

Dawn Longval said the cafe, which is now open for an evening meal on Mondays, and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, usually sees between 35 and 55 people each day. They come to visit with friends, have a cup of coffee and a piece of fruit, a hearty lunch, to get cleaned up, or to listen to Dawn play her guitar.

Led by their Christian faith, the Longvals said they felt directed by God to reach out to the local homeless population. They started in May 2017, bringing food and drinks, and Dawn's guitar to places where homeless people congregated. Once a week, every week, they could be counted on for a meal and some company.

As they got to know them as individuals, not just as homeless people, they decided that they could, and should, do more. They closed on a building on New Salem Street in January 2018, and spent months giving it a major renovation. They added a kitchen, bathrooms, laundry room, and a locker room where people can securely store important items such as prescription medications.

Isaiah 61 Cafe, named after a piece of scripture, welcomes anyone, Dawn said.

"Some are homeless, coming from the streets. Some live in their cars. Some are couch surfers. Some have their own apartments, but they have no extra means to pay for food or laundry," she said. "It's a pretty large spectrum of people."

That spectrum includes people who are under the influence of substances. But as long as they aren't posing a danger to others and aren't using drugs or drinking on the premises, the Longvals won't throw them out. Instead, they welcome those with addiction problems and hope that the relationships they build will someday be the reason that a person decides to seek sobriety.

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Dave Longval, one of the founders of Isaiah 61 Cafe, speaks with a woman during the anniversary celebration on Thursday. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)



Kori Marchand, Carol Paquin and Richard Bolduc joined the anniversary celebration for the Isaiah 61 Cafe in Laconia on Thursday. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

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That's what happened with Stephanie Hough, who just turned 37 and is celebrating eight months of sobriety.

"I met Dave and Dawn two years ago, when I was homeless, in the gazebo (at Rotary Park) and on drugs," she said. She was using meth, so gripped by addiction that she said she wished for death, because at least then she could stop using. "I had no hope for myself. I didn't think I could do it, at that point I wanted to die," she said.

But the Longvals wanted something else for her. "They love you right where you are," Hough said. "They have faith in you, they have that goal, and it gives you faith in yourself... They see that I have worth, maybe I do have worth, it builds from there."

Hough is now in an apartment that Lakes Region Mental Health Center helped her get into, and volunteers every day at Isaiah 61. She started an events committee for the cafe which, she said, "gives people who are down and out some positive things their life that they wouldn't otherwise experience."

"I found this joy and happiness that I didn't know existed. I didn't know that you could have fun or enjoy life without using... now I'm able to do that," Hough said.

The cafe has hosted birthday parties, baby showers and, when a member of the group has died, celebrations of life. For the cafe's Christmas party, Dawn said they made an ornament for each person who was visiting the cafe at that time, and they came up with more than 100 names.

Offers to help

As word has gotten out about the cafe, nearly as many people have offered to help, either as a volunteer, donor, or both. A trio of contractors, for example, volunteered their skills to help put a new roof on the building.

Some of those offers for help have come from medical professionals. Two doctors and a nurse have reached out to offer their services. People who are living on the street don't like to seek medical help, Dawn said, because they fear the way that they might be perceived when they walk in. So the Longvals are planning to convert some of their second-floor space for medical offices.

When they started, Isaiah Cafe was financed exclusively through the proceeds from Dave's marketing company. But as more help has come in – from many individuals as well as several local churches – the amount that the Longvals are shouldering is down to about one-fifth of the \$5,700 monthly cost.

Rob LaPointe said he first met the Longvals when they were bringing bag lunches out to Rotary Park at first, then to Riverside Cemetery when they were shooed out of the park. "They never missed a week, rain or shine," he said. "A lot of the times it was the only meal I had all day."

LaPointe had been homeless for 25 years at that point. He was homeless by choice, he said, as he prefers the camping lifestyle. But he now lives in an efficiency apartment, as he said that "drug users" have ruined his favorite camping sites.

Isaiah Cafe, he said, "is something that the homeless around here have needed for so long – that they don't get roused by the cops. You get more than two or three people that look homeless together and people call the cops, and the cops have to respond," LaPointe said. "Without this place, a lot of the homeless people, I don't know what they would do."

Dave Longval said he figured people like LaPointe and Hough, the group that he and Dawn used to visit with bags full of sandwiches and a tub of hot coffee, would form a family-like core to the cafe. What he was surprised by was how large that core would become.

"It's one big family. We get new family members every day," he said. "It's amazing. It's how you treat them. We don't treat them like second-class humans. How we'd like to be treated – that's how we treat them."

"This is just the beginning, we've got more things planned," Dave added.

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Isaiah 61 Cafe offers people of all backgrounds a chance to relax, eat and congregate. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)



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