

* Why they started their business

REBECCA STEWART AND ANGE WITHER

'The world is seeing more refugees fleeing their home countries. We have the resources and the privilege to be able to help them, so we felt that we should'

NIC MURRAY AND MARIE FITZPATRICK

'It isn't just about the caramel slice or cookies; it's about the generosity of the bakers and the realisation someone out there really cares'

BRIGITTE MOUAT

'Once upon a time, neighbours would look out for one another, especially when times were hard. That doesn't happen so much anymore but people still want to help'



Photographs (Nic and Marie, Rebecca and Ange) Marty Haughey Hair and makeup, Kaitlyn Delaney (Brigitte) Photograph Marea Wilkinson Hair and makeup, Desiree Osterman

Brigitte Mouat

FOUNDER OF ARMS OF ANGELS

Brigitte Mouat hasn't eaten for three years. Instead, the Tauranga resident gets by on one cup of coffee or glass of coconut water a day. The rest of her nutrients and fluids are pumped into her intestines via a machine she's hooked up to for nine hours a day. Brigitte, 50, has a condition called gastroparesis, which prevents her stomach from emptying. She developed it after a botched hernia operation in 2007, which severed a nerve to her stomach.

"It took a long time to diagnose but surgeons eventually told me I'd never eat food again," says Brigitte. Ironically, she loves cooking for her three adult children and grandson Laytin, eight, who she's raised since he was a baby. So when she received the diagnosis it was, she admits, "like a death sentence".

"I still wanted to eat because my brain told me I needed food to survive and because my stomach always felt empty. I would cry because I was so hungry."

Unable to sleep lying down (Brigitte has a special bed which allows her to sleep upright), she was constantly tired and had to close the nail salon she'd owned for three years.

"My world was caving in, but I started cooking huge amounts of food because I needed to see, smell and touch food so I could feel normal again."

It was too much food for family and friends so in mid-2015, Brigitte took the excess to her local Koha Centre (a not-for-profit where donated goods are available for a donation), thinking the families she'd seen visiting might like it.

GROWING STRONG

It became a regular occurrence and a few months later a volunteer at the centre told Brigitte one of the young mothers had asked for her recipe for devilled sausages. "I was so delighted she'd enjoyed it that I decided to go one better and give her the ingredients as well as the recipe. She told me no one had ever done anything like that for her before."

Brigitte started doing the same for other families until it proved too much of a stretch on the disability benefit she's been on since 2014. "I told friends about it and they offered to pay for ingredients."

Within weeks, the number of people dipping into their wallets increased so much that Brigitte was unable to manage on her own. She approached the owners of her local New World supermarket, who

offered to make up food packages for delivery.

"From there it all fell into place really quickly. My sister Maggie, who's CEO of an advertising agency, jumped in to build the website and in December 2015, Arms of Angels was open for business!"

THOSE IN NEED

Sponsors go onto the website to nominate a family (or pick any family from the database which can have up to 50 families at any one time), and pay \$15 a week for six weeks. That gets a needy family food parcels which include vegetables, rice, pasta, bread and meat, often missing from the diet of those struggling because of its price.

Sponsors can go onto the website to see what the family is receiving and to try the recipes themselves.

Almost two years since that fateful visit to the Koha Centre, around 1000 sponsored meal packages have been given to needy families by the not-for-profit. Brigitte, who's always had a social conscience and trained as a social worker in 2005, says she isn't surprised by its success.

BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

"Once upon a time, neighbours knew each other and would look out for one another, especially when times were hard. That doesn't happen so much anymore but people still want to help. They like that their money is being spent in their own community and that it all goes on food. The 10 of us involved in Arms of Angels are volunteers so every cent people give is spent on food."

Currently, the service is only available in Tauranga and Kapiti. But she hopes to take it nationwide by the end of this year. "Unfortunately, those who need our service is increasing. Thankfully, there are lots of wonderful people out there who care about struggling families so much they're willing to anonymously sponsor them."

Brigitte says she knows what it's like to wonder where the next meal is coming from. For 20 years, she raised her children alone after her husband left when they were under 10.

"I know from experience how hard things can be. That's why I love being able to tell recipients that a total stranger cares enough about them to pay for their meals. The look of joy on their faces always blows me away." *

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