

## Making Room at the Table – Our Story

Room at the Table began in June 2019 out of a conversation about how to serve people in the community struggling with food insecurity. Through conversations with local clergy who were operating soup kitchens, it was decided that it made the most sense to combine all of those programs and work with Room in the Inn Shoals, who was already operational as a non-profit and

had a large community infrastructure currently in place. The vision was to create a community space. A warm, inviting atmosphere - a place where anyone would feel comfortable to eat. A place for the community to be able to use for other needs during the day when we aren't serving the meal. A place where you can walk in the door and say "Wow. This is something special - this is somewhere I want to be".

Designed from the beginning to be a very different type of program than a traditional soup kitchen meal, Room at the Table wanted to be a community meal, where ANYONE could gather together to eat without the stigma and judgement normally present in similar type programs. We wanted each night to feel like a group of friends gathering together to share a meal and some good conversation. We wanted to create a place for everyone - single mothers with children, college students, elderly guests, folks with disabilities that struggled with preparing their own meals, homeless people, and anyone who just wanted to have a place to go to gather and not be alone.

We were very intentional and created things with a very specific vision. We started with challenging our community to help us purchase round tables instead of the standard long ones - tables that were more like a regular dinner table. We use real plates, silverware and napkins. We keep fresh flowers on the table and use tablecloths on our serving tables. We require every volunteer that serves to also eat dinner. This way, we are connecting as a community and erasing the "them" and "us" mentality that often comes with programs like ours. We trained and encouraged our volunteers and food teams to interact with everyone throughout the night. We have a blackboard outside the door with our menu - just as you might at a restaurant.

We began at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Florence. They had a large space with a commercial kitchen and had previously operated a soup kitchen, so it was already known as a place for a hot meal. We entered into a 6-month lease agreement with the church so that we could start quickly. We knew that the summer months were coming up and families with children struggled the most with food insecurity during the months school was out. We began looking for our own location before we even opened, knowing that our goal was to be in our own space before our lease agreement

was up. We knew that the majority of the people we knew who were struggling with food insecurity lived within a short distance from the church, so location was KEY. We also wanted to be within walking distance from UNA so hungry students would be able to walk. Many of our guests have limited transportation options, so we wanted to be as accessible as possible.

Our model is simple: We operate entirely with volunteers. Each night we have a food team group and a group of individual volunteers. Anyone can sign-up to help. Each group goes through a simple training. Food Teams are responsible for providing the food for the meal (we plan for 150 servings) and for bringing 12-14 volunteers. They can cook onsite or bring the food already prepared. All of this is scheduled in advance and is coordinated with our Room at the Table Coordinator.

Our Food Teams are made up of all kinds of different groups. We have college serve groups, church groups, neighborhood friends, book clubs, local restaurants and their employees, school sports groups, small businesses and their employees, tennis teams, local police officers, groups of local attorneys, college students and University departments - even a group of ladies who come from Huntsville to prepare and serve a meal in honor of one of the ladies husband, who loved to feed people and serve others. All it takes is a group of people and a willingness to serve. We also have individual volunteers who are there to provide additional serving support, roll silverware, set-up tables, run the dishwasher - do whatever it takes to make the night successful.

In just 6 short months, we have served thousands and thousands of meals. The average number of guests we serve each night hovers around 120. We have had over 80+ food teams participate, as well as a few hundred individual volunteers.