

# Empty Bowls and the hands that make them

Darin White 2017-03-01



**Laurie Cowell** (left) and **Rose Startek** started the local instance of Empty Bowls nineteen years ago to support [The Food Bank of Waterloo Region](#) to get people fed. It is very much a hands-on effort: each year [Waterloo Potters' Workshop](#) members shape clay bowls by the hundreds with their own hands, those bowls are filled with soup and sold at a charity lunch, the money raised goes to The Food Bank where every dollar donated creates three meals. **To help get our community fed, what can you give?**

In the Waterloo Region spirit of partnerships, the [Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery](#) does a ton of work managing ticket sales for the event. Those tickets go on sale April 1<sup>st</sup> every year and they sell out fast, so get that in your calendar. Right across the street is [Knox Waterloo Presbyterian Church](#) that generously hosts two of the three Empty Bowls meals. And on campus, [Laurier](#) hosts Empty Bowls at the University. The support continues with other businesses and organizations providing the food and drink, printing services, clay, and more.

Hi, it's Darin White here doing a little guest storytelling for The Food Bank. It was my delightful privilege to hang out with this whole crew of talented potters in their Waterloo Park workshop one Saturday for their mid-February "bowl-a-thon". This particular day was a focused push by the group to create as many bowls as possible. I later learned that 344 bowls came out of the gathering. To date, these folks

have raised \$250,000. That local support is critical given that The Food Bank's food acquisition and distribution programs receive no government funding. That was one of the many things I learned in the course of doing my homework for this set of stories. I learned a lot about the Waterloo Potters' Workshop as well. Both of these organizations you may be aware of in an abstract sense. You may have assumed there's probably a food bank and you may have crossed paths with a spring or fall pottery sale here. I'm going to show you the people in the mix. That makes it all very real and very personal for me. If I'm doing this right, you might feel the same.

Dive in with me for a lot of photos of the people and place that crackles with positive energy. Let's go...



Nestled atop the hill in Waterloo Park is the Waterloo Potters' Workshop. They're celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday next year, so we certainly all have a lot to learn about sustainability inside these walls. Starting as a non-profit cooperative with nine members, they now have 125 potters in the group.

I thought I'd be interviewing Laurie and Rose, but when I arrived they were just coming off a chat with Tyler from CTV. "Have him talk with Harriet! Yes, Harriet!" Laurie piped up from a busy hallway when I rolled in at noon. Here's Harriet (above) at the wheel, throwing bowls, joking with the other potters \*and\* talking with me about Empty Bowls. When I asked her how long she had been a member she replied "Well, I joined in 1975, so what's the math? 42 years?" She is an excellent ambassador for the organization and notes with some glee "I met my husband here. Norm was the electric kiln maintenance person. I married well!"



Harriet estimated that 60 to 75 of the members have their own studio, complete with a kiln, but they still support this long-running group and the Bowl-a-thon is a good reason for them to come together in person. "Empty Bowls is certainly the jewel in our crown. It's wonderful to be able to give back to the community." To get to the 600 to 800 bowls needed for Empty Bowls there is even more bowl making that happens at other times like the Workshop's Celebrate Summer event in June. And potters will often donate bowls from their own studios.



Najma at the next wheel told me that all bowls start as a cylinder.



This supply of tiles and 1-pound hunks of clay would be quickly turned into bowls.





Looking at this team of potters made me think of the team approach in what is called Waterloo Region's Food Assistance Network. If you're just learning about The Food Bank for the first time, let me explain: The Food Bank of Waterloo Region, along with the Cambridge Self Help Food Bank, is where donated food ultimately lands to then be distributed out to partner organizations. It is then these partnering community agencies and food programs that get the food into the hands of people who need it. Teamwork!



Rose told me that before Empty Bowls was started in Waterloo Region, the Gardiner Museum in Toronto had been asking Waterloo potters to donate bowls for their Empty Bowls event, which they did.

That was part of the inspiration to start a local effort. The guidelines for Empty Bowls events require that fundraising must support people getting fed within the region of the event.





So many bowls.  
So many households in need. Each year, 1 in 20 households in Waterloo Region access food support.

Wonderful to know that each of these bowls is destined to raise enough to provide food for 150 essential meals in Waterloo Region.



Recalling the first time they talked about doing Empty Bowls: “Remember? We were talking in the swimming pool.” There was also a bit of getting the record straight on who had joined the Waterloo Potters’ Workshop first.

I learned from Ruth Friendship-Keller at The Food Bank that 1998, the year of the first Empty Bowls, was the same year The Food Bank began its perishable food program. They distributed 1.8 million pounds of food that year and 20% of it was perishable.

Last year The Food Bank distributed 5.6 million pounds of food and 66% of it was perishable. The Region has grown and so has the need and so has The Food Bank’s ability to provide safe, nutritious food. Thanks to partners like the Waterloo Potters’ Workshop.



Esther pulled her bowl out of the form. The cheesecloth helps release the clay and provides some useful handles.

A few touch-ups and it's ready to go.



Thank you to all the potters for allowing me into your world. Your joy was infectious and had me walking two feet off the ground for the rest of the day. Bravo to you for supporting The Food Bank of Waterloo Region and helping get people fed in our community. I'll see you all at Empty Bowls for soup.

**Esther gave this bowl to help get our community fed.  
What can you give?**

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