

Les Back

Hello, and welcome to recovering community, a podcast about community, what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt.

I'm Les Back. I'm the Head of Sociology at the University of Glasgow. And in my first year as a new Glaswegian, I've been getting out and about in the city, meeting people in their communities and the academic researchers from the School of Social and Political Sciences, who are alongside them, making knowledge and finding solutions. It's been a fascinating and inspiring experience.

It's all too easy in our age of inequality to only see what divides us. But in making this podcast, it's so clear to me that the threads that bind the social fabric together are strong here. If we learn how to notice them, I don't think there's a more powerful symbol of community than the soup pot. It's both a distinctive part of Scottish working-class experience, and at the same time, a universal ritual of solidarity in hard times. Eating a home cooked meal is a kind of communion with others.

But what happens to a family or even a whole society when the basic necessity of food is out of reach? The huge demand on food banks in recent years is a stark reminder of just how big of a problem food poverty is. And it's a highly politicised problem that brings out the best and the worst in us. But what if we were to think about food solidarity, instead of food poverty? If we think about sharing a meal, with someone sitting next to you at a table, rather than crumbs of charity handed out by the privileged to ease our conscience.

I first met the women of Castlemilk's food solidarity Superheroes. That is s.o.u.p as in the soup pot, at the University of Glasgow through my colleague and friend, Kate Loughlin, who is the community knowledge exchange lead. Kait runs a program called Community Matters that train researchers in how to work with communities. And the insights of the superheroes have been part of this process of educating the researchers.

These heroes don't wear capes. Their superpower comes in the form of fresh fruit and veg, bags of lentils, free music events, and hope and solidarity by the pound, delivered every week in Castlemilk. So for this episode, I swapped the desk for the kitchen table. Cathy Milligan is a long standing Castlemilk resident and activist. She welcomed me to her house, along with fellow Souperheroes her niece, Natali, and Bridget Crossan. We were also joined by Paddy McKenna, who is the Community Development Manager for the Cassiltoun Housing Association, and Kait Laughlin, who provided some posh sandwiches from Waitrose on behalf of our sponsors. And fittingly, we ate together as we talked, you won't hear much from me, other than the occasional reminder of who's talking. So I'd like to invite you to pull up a virtual chair and meet these extraordinary women. The first voice you'll hear is Cathy and I began by asking her how the superheroes got started

Cathy Milligan

What we set out to do was fundraise so that, because there's other like food banks and stuff that always had a proviso you that you had to fill out a form and claim how poor you were so that you would

get a food bank and also the food banks are all non perishable foods so that you weren't getting any fresh fruit and veg and, and stuff like that.

So going through that struggle ourselves and knowing how that makes you feel as a human being and like a bit worthless living that kind of poverty, we thought it'd be great if we pulled together got as many resources and shared it back out to the community. So our aim is every other Saturday that we go out with soup pack or a fresh fruit and dish it out at different street corners in Castlemilk, because the shopping center was our initial place but but we decided to change that because we know through experience that when you're skint you don't even want to go to the shops because it just remains you know, but you have not got.

So we do our best to go round different corners of Castlemilk and dish it out. Alongside that we also do events and the events. The aim of the events is to raise our spirits, because one of the things again, that goes is the joy of life and being alive, because you're just in survival mode. And we're targeting the people that we know, and letting people know about the resources are there, they're just shared out in the wrong way and we want a change that. We want people to come together. They more people that come together, the more resources we have to be able to share out in the community.

Les Back

You talked about going around Castlemilk, and the food being circulated in different ways. Could you just tell us a little bit about how that works?

Cathy Milligan

It works brilliantly because we're out and within half an hour, we maybe have 50 to 100 soup packs, and within half an hour, that's gone and it's word of mouth. And everything, there's no questions asked. And the idea is that for people who think of a collective pot of soup that we're all making a pot of soup together and we're all in this together. We're all getting impacted with the cost of greed crisis and we need to do something about it. And it's the reaction everybody's it's so positive and it's such a good feeling all round

Les Back

Something about soup, isn't there. You make soup night just for yourself. And when I first heard about what you're doing souperheroes s o u p e r, there's something about the making of soup that invites sort of something shared. Do you think that's right?

Cathy Milligan

Absolutely. I think that's right, we also do food drives and we have non perishable foods at our events, and we'll give them out, but the the idea is a collective pot of soup that we're in different streets. And so like say, we were doing this street, the thought of all of our neighbours making a pot soup, and it's just that as you say that kind of homely feel with it. Everybody loves a pot soup

Bridget Crossan

When I was growing up, and that for probably an awful lot of people in the community. If it was a couple of days before payday, you know, my dad would be the only breadwinner, so my mum wasn't working. And a couple of days before payday, the wage was gone, you know, and there was no food so a pot of soup would get made.

Les Back

This is Cath's friend Bridget Crossan. As well as the souperheroes, Bridget is also involved in the Castlemilk Cooks Up Memories project.

Bridget Crossan

And it would get made on Wednesday because payday was on the Friday. So there was six of us in the house, and that pot of soup would do us to Friday, you know, it might watered down the second day, but it still done... it, you know, so we never went hungry, because that pot of soup was there. And it's not something that cost a lot of money. Although even people might not be able to afford that soup pack. However, if we can give them it they could get maybe one to two days dinners out of that soup pack. We don't know the story that they have got and why they're taking it, we just know that we're sharing it with them.

Les Back

Because that's one of the dangers isn't it of the whole idea of the Food Bank and stuff that you're, there are some people who are giving and other people who are taking and as a result of that it kind of inflates the worth of the giver and by whether it's meant or not it can be wounding to the one who's taking it. And that seems to be something that you're doing that's very different.

Natali Milligan

It's like it changes everything. Because even the connections, you've got them sometimes are so downtrodden that everybody's just got their head down, walking about, doing their shopping.

Les Back

This is Natali. She's Cath's niece. And she's a big part of the souperhero's work.

Natali Milligan

But now, it's so nice when you go up there and you see people and just smile and say hiya. And so it opens they connections up as well. And so it's a beautiful thing,

Cathy Milligan

Thing is the reason why you're doing it is because we're living that, we are struggling with the poverty. So we have the incite of the kind of feelings and we don't want anybody to have those feelings we want them to know that they deserve better. Everybody deserves better, and we shouldn't be worry about that we don't have enough veg and fruit for our weans and stuff and the worst feeling is getting handed a voucher because you're struggling and you're not entitled to any benefits and you're struggling, someone gives you a voucher to go in and get food that don't even always like yourself you, you've got you make do. So that's why we stick to the fresh fruit and veg as well because these are staples. These are things that people need. We're doing it because we're in this struggle, we're struggling every day and we need a pot of soup, we need the soup packs just as much as the people we're giving them to.

Les Back

I think that's so powerful. But could we, could I just ask you a little bit about how that's done, the work that is involved in getting to the point where that, the food can be shared in that way. Tell us how that works, the preparation and the making of the food.

Cathy Milligan

It's been hard and thanks to somebody like Paddy who's a community development worker in Castlemilk, we've had loads of support. She's helped us find funds to be able to buy the food initially to set up. It was through interacting with Paddy and also the confidence that she gave us, she believed in us as well. So I think that a lot of credit goes to her attitude and everything as well. And the process is soon as we've got a wee bit of money, we go and buy like fifty soup packs. The shopping center the Braes fruit and veg shop up in Castlemilk does a really great soup pack for two pounds.

And it's good to turnip, the carrot and the leek and everything else, and then we buy like, a bag of lentils, and then we bag up 50 lentils to go like that. And usually we do it like collectively round the table and share that out, round the kitchen table and do that. The fruit, the fruit we got delivered from the fruit market and it was loads, we bagged that up. So it was really, really plentiful bag of a fruit as well. So it's me, Bridget, Natali, mostly, but we have people will come in and help us as well, because they are interested in doing that too. So we're always asking for it, because that's what we're always say get involved and we've got a Facebook page and numbers and stuff.

Les Back

Here is Bridget again.

Bridget Crossan

With the events that we do, we we had our first event in the hope that we would have, it was our dream to hold this big music event and be able to give out all the food then. So it kind of started there where we would just email just everybody that we could think of. People we didn't know, just chancing our arm, and we got back great response. So that then allowed us to buy loads of food with it, which we bagged. We also got stacks of food donations. And the post office workers were all striking at that time, so they done a food drive and they donated so much for to us. All different places were donating plus helping us do the food drive. And then on the night we ended up we made 100 bags of food, plus 100 soup packs, plus there was buffet food that had all been donated. So we made all that up, then we fundraised that night. But we weren't intentionally fundraising, it was really kind of strange the way it happened. Because we put up you know, there's no entry fee, you're no buying tickets. And this is a free night. So the motto for the event was, you know, pay what you can, if you can. But people were coming in, and they were putting donations in a bucket. So those donations it then allowed us to carry on with the souperheroes. But the people come forward and they want to help. And the very first event we had was like 180 people showed up, which blew our minds. And I'm not even gonna lie, like not a bit alcohol, there was no drink, you know. So all these people came in, they had food and they had the best time and the great time and they couldn't wait to find out when the next event was. They all came sober and all went home super, which was great.

Les Back

Paddy can I just ask you about your involvement, and the kinds of things that you do. Just tell us a little bit about your connection, I suppose to start with

Paddy McKenna

My involvement, I think is a lot less than what Cath, and Bridget and Natali say. But my role as a community worker is I guess like, thinking about what the souperheroes do.

Les Back

And this is Paddy McKenna. She's a Community Development Manager for Cassiltoun Housing Association.

Paddy McKenna

For me, it is creating space for that to happen. So when people talk about participation, that's what it looks like, or empowerment, that word that gets thrown around. That's what souperheroes doing is that asset based community development as souperheroes are doing. And I think my involvement means we are using words like connection and things. Reflecting back, I'd met Cath, when I first started in Castlemilk, I think when I came along to meet the other group you're part of years ago, just as part of community mapping and being like, hi, I'm the new community worker, and then got to know Bridget through an idea that Bridget had Castlemilk Cooks Up Memories. We back in some part of lockdown met in our garden and talked through that idea. Met Natali in amongst that and I think for me, there was a point where I was like Oh, Bridget is wanting to do that, Cath's doing that. You obviously knew each other before, but there's connections to be made there. And then I think my role throughout has probably been a bit of a sounding board maybe or also learning a lot, like souperheroes are really good at holding me to account as well, giving me ideas. Bridget shaking her head but it's true, in a good way that you should have.

Les Back

Would you describe what Paddy does in that way?

Bridget Crossan

Probably the polar opposite of what Paddy's just said to be perfectly honest with you. Paddy doesn't realise just how much she's supported Cath and I and Natalie through getting the souperheroes up and running. Even if you're feeling a bit downtrodden before you go into a meeting with Paddy, you really come out elated. And I know that's a dead powerful word and probably sounds as if I'm over exaggerating. But I'm not, like you do, you come back and you just know, when somebody's got that belief in what you're doing, it really does bring it home to you that you're doing the right thing, and that it's possible.

Les Back

I'm not speaking for you Paddy in any way. But you know, we have phrases like asset-based community development, which academics dream up. But I think what we're often trying to get to is something about the importance of realising that people, you shouldn't see people in communities as having deficits, their resources, they have ideas that are brilliance, they have insight, they experience

they're living the issues that you're you're challenged by, you know, and that the solutions are not outside, they're often within would you say that that was similar to the kinds of things you were thinking about Paddy?

Paddy McKenna

Yeah definitely. I think, over the years, I've worked in Castlemilk for nearly eight years, which is amazing. And I think that a lot of the time, when you're trying to do things like asset-based community development, where you genuinely see people and place as asset, it can be really hard, because folk aren't used to being seen like that. They're not used to be respected like that. So sometimes it can take a while to balance out that power thing that goes on. So folks, see you as a person that delivers a service, often without genuinely having people's input. And it can take a long time to balance that out and to be seen as someone who's quite genuine, who still gets it wrong sometimes, which is what we all, we're only human. But I think there's some folk that go round Castlemilk that I remember it took two years for them to smile back at me, you know what I mean, and I was like, yes, I've done it. Because it's folk who've seen folk like me come and go over the years who even the term community development... I remember someone I can't remember who it was saying, oh so you're here to develop us are you? And I was like, ah, yeah, so I now just introduce himself as a community worker most of the time, because it is, as you say, a bit of an academic phrase, what does it mean, and words together could sound quite patronising. So it's tricky, doing that type of work in geographical communities that have often been told, that's the work that's happening, and it's not. So it's almost jargon gaslighting or something. So it's been a journey in a lot of ways. But it's good to hear, I wouldn't keep disagreeing with the lovely ladies of souperheroes, but it's good to hear that it's come across the way it's been intended.

Bridget Crossan

And I think that's why we're working. I think that's why it's becoming successful because we all sang off the same song sheet, and we all want the same goal. And the goal is to make our community better and bring it together and help each other and make each other happy, we do voice calls to each other, and they seem to inspire. It's like a way of kind of boosting each other for the morning you know, and and the day ahead, if we know we've got a challenge in the day ahead, then we just give up the voice call and say "up and out 'em, let's go and give out soup!" You know, and that's us back to smiling and getting on with each other, but every time we feel downtrodden it's amazing because somebody in the community seems to, or something happens in the community that gives us, it restores it back but we're doing is right

Les Back

Our podcast is called recovering community. And in a way one of the...we're trying to think about the idea of recovering in two ways you know, recovering taking back, making your own, communities making them their lives their own, as well as there is damage in the world and there is hunger in the world and, and there is poverty. The words we use matter don't they? There's something about the idea of food solidarity, that is a different way of thinking about the challenge that you're trying to address. I don't know, how did you arrive at that? And what do you think about that?

Cathy Milligan

Because I think that we were saying before but people patronising you, it has to come to a level because... there's a good saying, I can't remember who it is, it's saying similar to, if you're coming here to stand beside me in your fight, and you recognise that your fight is the same as my fight and we can work together, then I think that's the idea of the food solidarity and it's to highlight the fact that the disparity in the world is getting worse and worse, but the resources, all the food and everything that's created comes from communities like ourselves, it's the working-class that create that. So I think that the superheroes part, I'm not a big fan of that. But the food, it starts with food solidarity, again, like getting feedback about Bridget is an amazing person. She's so talented, and everything she does and the community is fortunate to have someone like her and she she also is really popular. She's much more popular than me so, so I'm kind of hiding behind her and doing my thing as well, so I mean it is really important, who you're working and standing alongside as well and that we're believing in the same thing

Les Back

You mentioned the word stigma. I just want to, I want to ask you all actually at how do you think that, I'm a newcomer to Glasgow as you can tell, but how do you think Castlemilk's thought of outside of its community, and I just wanted to get a sense of what kind of consciousness you have of that.

Bridget Crossan

I mean, Castlemilk outside the community can be frowned upon quite a bit. And we can be seen as a deprived area. And we are, you know, there's a lot of resources we don't have in the community that we should have. But unfortunately, the old saying mud sticks, you know, and we're all born and bred in Castlemilk, and I wouldn't move out Castlemilk now, because I know...I don't know everybody, but I've watched it change during the years, it's, you know, it's, it's went through really bad times. And both you know, with gang fighting and, and watching it visually going downhill. And people that you went to school, with go downhill and lose their lives through one thing and another in the community. And I think that makes us fight even harder for what we believe in, because we've seen how the people have reached the depths of desperation, you know, and through their mental health and joined in, then you know, they've got involved with the wrong things. And unfortunately, that's the exterior, they see those bats before they see the heart of our community. Because as a great place.

Cathy Milligan

When I was growing up, there were 66000 people living here in the biggest scheme in Europe. And that's changed down to 14000. But the poverty is still there, and it still, and the lifestyles that people lead they get patronised about, is the worst thing. Because it's like the Jeremy Kyle thing where people are trotted out and you say, Oh, look at that. And this is how they behave in this scheme. But actually, it's the way human beings behave given a set of circumstances and an environment that we live in. So the stigma that's here is part of the stigma of poverty. And it's part of a way of keeping people divided and pointing fingers at people and saying, aye look at that. So that's why they deserve nothing. And it's, and it's a lot of shite really, I think that we need to challenge that. And that's really, that's at the heart of what we're doing

Natali Milligan

That's why your voice is so important, Cathleen, because you managed to articulate it for people. I just have to say that, it's so true. Amazing, beautifully put

Les Back

There's a couple of things that we've said before, just the phrase, putting food on the table, in a way seems to speak to some of the things we were talking about before about the judgments of people who gets to eat, who doesn't. It's a way in which that experience of of living in a divided world where there are scarce resources gets lived out, who doesn't get to eat? Yeah, who do you provide for first in families, their judgments that people are making? Often all the time aren't they?

Bridget Crossan

I think straight away it starts at you know who's giving food out or, or where the food's coming from, doesn't it that brings judgment went straight away, because like a food bank or anywhere, you know, you're filling out a form, you've got to be eligible to get food, you've got to prove that you don't have any money. The fact that that person standing in the queue, and actually there for food should, is all the evidence they need I mean, why would they take food if you didn't need it? You know, really,

Cathy Milligan

One of the things like food banks and everything is so patronising as well. It just shouldn't exist. And it's a basic human right. It's like the day, we are lucky enough to get a sandwiches from Waitrose, but that's not something that we would get. The only by you we would get that is through the food that they've thrown out. At the last event that we had, somebody had went to one of their containers and brought over, and it was food that wasn't really out of date. It was like fresh chicken and things like that. And it just it makes me so angry, and that dumping of food. The supermarket's are saying, alright, you can't make a profit from that so they'll dump it, and it's a huge waste. It's absolutely ridiculous. But that's like the crumbs from the captain's table that we get. So that makes me angry. And that's why it's really important to say no, food solidarity, we all deserve better and we deserve to have the best of nutrition if we're going to survive this world as well. So in a way, when we're doing this, we're also challenging. The bigger picture of making profit out of feeding people and it's disgraceful.

Les Back

Could I just ask you a little bit before coming to Kait, about the joy and memory, and I love the idea of your project around Castlemilk Cooks Up Memories. Food does that as well, doesn't it? It obviously gives us joy and sustenance, but it often connects us to our histories and past and presents, and sometimes our futures as well.

Bridget Crossan

Food is the one thing that the whole world has got in common that everybody has in common with each other is food, because we all need it to survive. And to not have it, not only just makes you go hungry, but it also disconnects you, from people around you. But if you put food down on the table, to people it breaks a huge barrier straight away. Like it makes everybody talk and almost like, like if people are nervous. And suddenly they're talking and they're laughing and joking, it just has that. And that's missing, that must be hugely missing in a lot of families, we need that connection. And that's what does it

Les Back

Kait, can I just come back, and in a way, you've been the link in this conversation, and the work that you do at the university now in making connections and dialogues. And I just wondered how you think about that, and the importance of the type of conversations you're facilitating and the connections that you're doing, why it's important, and also some of the challenges about that, too.

Kait Laughlin

I think these conversations that are absolutely the reason why I'm doing the job that I'm doing. And I think that universities are becoming more and more aware of the importance of actually, you know, creating jobs like mine, to actually to join these dots and to bring people together because it's the reality of what's happening. And the needs, as Cath and Bridget and Natali have said in their different ways of actually standing side by side in solidarity, that I think, is the reason why I do the job. And the reason why so many people in the university want to understand more about the reality of what's happening, not only what's happening, but to try and work together to create influence and change. So I think that universities know that they have to do this work. And universities have had strategies, and words that actually talk about how important it is. To have all these jargon terms. We talked about jargon terms and housing, policies and housing work and terms like knowledge exchange, which is part of my job title, and community engagement, and all these things. But I think increasingly, they're recognising that, as I said, that they have to resource jobs like mine.

Les Back

Also, it's not always easy, is it? And that's part of the struggle, it seems to me in terms of how to find a language that that isn't wounding,

Kait Laughlin

Well, that that image already exists, it exists in this room. It exists from the mouths and the thoughts and the ideas of other people that we've just been listening to. And I think it comes down to power. And we recognise that places like universities and housing associations, to a certain extent as well have power, have influence and have the power to shape change. But that also means that in some cases, some of the people who work within these institutions haven't necessarily been in a position to perhaps experience some of the realities that they're making policy decisions or are conducted research about and so on. So I think I am a great believer in actually naming these things that are hidden in the dark. And part of my job is to raise awareness and to have training programs for researchers and their development and working with communities. And I'm absolutely determined, difficult though it might be to kind of put some of these issues on the table to talk more about issues of power and entitlement to talk more about who it is who has to do the adjusting. And it's the people with the power who obviously have to be prepared to give up some of that and doing the adjusting. And also to name words like class, like social class poverty, we still have a lot of euphemisms for poverty, sometimes. The latest one is it gets kind of hidden under the health and wellbeing umbrella. And of course, poverty is one of the biggest drivers of inequalities and health. But we need to name it for what it is. Because what's the point if we're not actually grounding it in reality,

Les Back

and this is Natali, again.

Natali Milligan

Governments are very much nameless and faceless. So instead of getting all this...our anger has been channeled into the wrong thing and looking for people to blame. And because people in power are nameless and faceless to us, we tend to have a way of taking it out on each other so, you're right, it is about making it clear.

Bridget Crossan

Can I just say as well, like coming from us, we do souperheroes, from our houses you know, we don't have any accommodation or anything like that, we do in our kitchens, and we store any food and that in our own bedrooms and that as well. And we go out and we work on the street, with a pop up table or a shopping trolley. And for it now, through Kait to have an institution like Glasgow University to want to hear what we're doing and want to hear what it's like and not only proves the divide that is there, but also it's lovely to know that they want to hear our view, hopefully it's going to make a change in people's perspective in what really is going on outside. So I want to thank Kait and yourselves for allowing us this opportunity to speak how we feel and be listened to

Les Back

Powerful words there from Bridget Crossan. I want to thank her, Paddy McKenna, Natali and Cathy Milligan for a wonderful afternoon of conversation and food. My deep gratitude also goes to my colleague Kait Laughlin, who made this episode possible.

Primo Levi, the great Italian writer once commented that there is not only an art to telling a story, but there is also an art of listening. Knowledge and understanding rely upon it. That's what was at stake in Cathy's kitchen. And perhaps this is the biggest lesson for those of us who want to understand and recover community. There's more information in the show notes about the food solidarity superheroes, and the Castlemilk Cooks Up Memories cookbook, if you're looking for an affordable recipe or two.

I'm Les Back. Thanks so much for listening to this episode of Recovering Community. And I hope you'll join me next time for an opportunity to think differently about the role of museums.

Zandra Yeaman

People can be more than one thing, we are complex as human beings, but it seems when it comes to history, people become memorialised, and the complexities are no longer something that folk are comfortable to talk about.

Les Back

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Recovering community is produced by Freya Hellier