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## The 'pay as you can' cafe

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This holiday season, many are thinking of those who are less fortunate. Taking that sentiment several steps further, Brad and Libby Birky of Denver have created a nonprofit restaurant called SAME (So All May Eat) Cafe with a "pay as you can" pricing model. Yes, you read that correctly. Instead of standard menu-based pricing, a donation box is set in the corner, and people are expected to pay what they can. Those who can't afford to pay are asked to help with manual labor: washing dishes, mopping the floor and the like. Those who can afford it often pay a bit more to contribute to the social mission.

The Birky family wanted to do something dramatically different after putting in years of volunteering at various food banks and shelters, where canned food is the standard fare and handouts sometimes are dispensed with cold

detachment. At SAME, their philosophy is that everyone - regardless of economic status or station in life - deserves the chance to eat healthy food while being treated with dignity and respect.

SAME is not a soup kitchen. The volunteers are vigilant about asking customers to contribute something, whether money or labor. There also is a spirit of the place, a welcoming family atmosphere.

At SAME, homeless people and others down on their luck find they are not invisible, because it's not just a cafe: It's a community where people know and care about each other and are afforded an opportunity to start making better choices in their lives.

The meals at SAME are cooked with fresh organic ingredients. (Mr. Birky has taken two years of culinary and restaurant-management classes.) And what soup kitchens serve eggplant and roasted-red-pepper pizza?

The plan for the cafe was born on a cocktail napkin on a plane, and it was a combination of three passions: The Birkys wanted to serve the community, they wanted to attack the problem of hunger in American society, and they love to cook.

They also were inspired by an existing cafe in Salt Lake City called One World Everybody Eats. Its founder, Denise Cerreta, had created a cafe and a foundation focused on ending hunger, with an aspiration to create a community kitchen in every city. (She even created a "how to" guidebook for that purpose.) The SAME Cafe is one testament to that vision.

Back in Denver, some customers are befuddled by the lack of standard pricing, to which Mr. Birky suggests they simply consider three things: How much did you eat? How much would you pay for that meal elsewhere? What is fair for your budget? (The cafe also "suggests" a range of \$3 to \$6 for soup and such and \$5 to \$15 for a full meal.) Sometimes this pricing strategy pays handsome dividends. For example, one customer -- presumably either very satisfied or deeply inspired or both -- left a \$500 check in the donation box.

It's not just about food, though. One homeless man, known by the Birkys only as "Kidd," dropped by regularly to work for a square meal. He confessed that he was hoping to make it back to New Orleans to start over. Sure enough, according to a Denver Catholic Register report, he came in well-dressed and clean-shaven one day, and nobody recognized him at first. He had saved enough money and was heading home to "make a success of his life."

What of the Birkys? In 2006, they scraped together \$30,000 to open the cafe (after ensuring that they had paid off their car). Mr. Birky went two years before drawing any salary (and now it's just a modest one - a big pay cut from his previous endeavors) and Mrs. Birky donates her time in the evenings while teaching fifth- and sixth-graders during the day to help pay the family's bills. So why do they do it? "Running a restaurant is not an easy venture, but it is really rewarding," Mrs. Birky says. "It's about building a community more than anything else. Getting to do something we love and benefiting the community is about as rewarding as it gets."

That's a message we can all chew on this holiday season.

For more information or to donate, visit [www.soallmayeat.org](http://www.soallmayeat.org).

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