

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

## ‘Gather’ offers relief for hunger & loneliness



GATHER AT 48 Merchants Row in Middlebury hosted a Thanksgiving dinner last Thursday for around 60 people, many of them houseless and/or struggling with other challenges. Pictured here, from left, are Gather helpers Busshin Nash, Joshin Byrnes, Peg Murray, Dinah Smith and Bernie Schlager. Independent photo John Flowers

**November 30, 2023**  
**By John Flowers**

MIDDLEBURY — One never knows who'll be gathering at Gather, billed as Middlebury's new "community living room," at 48 Merchants Row.

This past Thanksgiving, Nov. 23, saw almost 60 people converge upon the 1,400-square-foot building that contains a spacious activities room, kitchen and restrooms. Those who *Gather* are offered food; access to laundry and shower facilities; conversation; educational, artistic and recreational activities; camaraderie; and empathy.

All of it delivered free and in a safe, supervised setting with basic rules that include no labels or judgment.

A mixture of philanthropy, patience and altruism designed to fill bellies, buoy spirits and help people deal with what *Gather* architect Joshin Byrnes calls “the epidemic of loneliness.”

Time will tell if *Gather* has staying power, but members of Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community (BLMZC) in Cornwall have high hopes.

“We created *Gather* as a space where everyone is welcomed and treated in just the same way and just as they are, no matter how they’ve been labeled by society, professional services and culture,” said Byrnes, leader of the BLMZC, which launched *Gather* as a secular, humanitarian offering this past February.

“A community isn’t made up of labeled people,” he continued, as more folks trickled into the space while volunteers readied a Thanksgiving Day meal. “A community is made up of whole-being humans, relating and vibing with each other on many levels. A community is made from all kinds of life experiences and of people who all share and can see in each other the same wish for connection, purpose, safety and acceptance.”

Many of those frequenting *Gather* are in search of a helping hand as much as they’re in need of a friend.

On this Thanksgiving Day, a bearded man cloaked in warm clothing was hunched over in a chair, working hard to bring his body to room temperature after a night spent outdoors.

A young woman in recovery from substance use disorder received a welcome hug from a *Gather* volunteer as she summoned the courage to meet new people.

A man who Byrnes said was “having a bad day” abruptly made his way out the front door to smoke a cigarette outside.

Several people at *Gather* have seen their share of bad days. Whether self-inflicted or foisted upon them, those bad days have accumulated and derailed their lives. At *Gather*, they find folks in the same boat, as well as others who aren’t struggling.

“Yes, a lot of people who have been living in the encampments or in their cars have been coming to *Gather* along with many others who are part of the mosaic of the community,” Byrnes said. “We have seen an increase in demands for food, showers, laundry and warm resting spaces.”

“Everyone, housed and unhoused, comes offering something and needing something no matter who they are, and they share, sometimes receiving and other times giving,” he added. “Honestly, sometimes you just forget about giving and receiving and it’s just life happening in each other’s company.”

Gather “friends,” as they are called, can keep to themselves if they’d like, or they can participate in free programming that includes craft days, “creativity jams,” singalongs, game nights, “mindfulness groups,” and recovery and wellness meets.

A young woman named Faith has been a regular at Gather since it opened. Her life has already had a lot of ups and downs, and she appreciates the structure and ground rules of Gather, which emphasize cooperation and friendship. It’s a system she believes has kept her away from people and influences that might lead her astray.

“Without this place, I’d be alone — or someplace I shouldn’t be,” said Faith, her eyes peering shyly from under the brim of a cap.

She feels so strongly about her new safe haven that she volunteers there when she can.

“It’s kind of like a second home,” Faith said.

Henry dreams of world travel and excitement, but on this particular Thanksgiving, Gather — in his hometown of Middlebury — was the only place he could imagine himself being. He’s there an average of three times per week. He meets up with friends, plays cards, has a cup of coffee and a nutritious meal.

“I love this place,” he said. “I enjoy the peaceful cooperation. No fighting, no violence. It’s like a family.”

Cathy has become another Gather regular. She’s there around four times a week, spending a couple of hours at a time. Cathy has no family in the area; her friends at Gather have assumed that role.

“It’s a great place,” she said. “It has a cozy feeling.”



"GATHER," BILLED as Middlebury's "community living room," was a popular place on Thanksgiving Day. Around 60 people met up at Gather for food, games, warmth on a cold day, and banter.  
Independent photo John Flowers

Gather opened at just the right time for Cathy.

"I'd been going through a really hard time and this place has helped me get back on my feet," she said. "The staff is absolutely wonderful."

Steve Fidler is blind but finds his way to Gather at least once each week, usually on Thursdays.

"It's really the community part that I love," he said.

Being without sight has never held him back; he's a newly minted author who used to operate a solo massage and hypnotherapy practice. Like millions of other folks worldwide, Fidler experienced his share of setbacks in early 2020.

"When COVID came, I lost my business and got shut in," he said.

He credited Gather with restoring a sense of normalcy to his life.

"When I came here for the first time, I loved the welcoming atmosphere and the people," Fidler said. "It was powerful for me because I had become so disconnected. I was reconnecting with people."

He'd like to become a more frequent "Gatherer," but his lack of sight makes it challenging to get rides. He's particularly keen on making the Friday and Saturday singalong sessions.

## **SPECIAL MOMENTS**

Whether it's one day or three, Fidler said he's happy with any amount of time he's able to spend at Gather.

"I already have so many great moments and stories with people here," he said. "It's about creating unique and special moments, and they stay with all of us."

And Fidler recently had a special moment to share with his new friends: The release in late October of his first book, "The Two Paths." Eight years in the making, "The Two Paths" shares how, in a single night at age 23, Fidler's life shifted from graduating college with honors and a bright future, to unexpectedly losing his sight.

While Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community embraces Buddhism, Byrnes stressed that Gather is, and will remain, a nonreligious offering.

"We're not pushing a religious agenda. But we do honor the spiritual lives of people because that's part of a whole human being," he said. "It's not uncommon for people to be asking those big existential questions here, such as, 'Why do I suffer?' 'What comes after life?' People come with hopes, aspirations and dreams."

BLMZC's lease for 48 Merchants Row extends through May 2025. Gather is run by volunteers, but it still costs around \$50,000-\$60,000 annually to cover rent, utilities, food and other expenses, according to Byrnes.

"So far, we've been able to meet expenses and we hope to be able to do so in the future," he said. "This is a project that really depends on the generosity of a big group of people."

BLMZC doesn't ask for governmental support because it doesn't want to become tangled in the strings that often come with such assistance.

"Sometimes government funding forces you to narrow your target population; we're trying to avoid that language and approach," Byrnes said. "To do it this way requires a practice for us of asking for what we need and working with what we've got. We have some principles that drive that — we're trying to feed people the healthiest food we can afford that's palatable for them, that's locally sourced, that's healthy. It sends a signal that they're valued and that we care about their health and tradition."

As much as Gather gives to others, the recipients always seem to have something to share, according to Byrnes. It might be food, stories and words of encouragement.

“Our project is not so much about providing a social service as it is about holding an informal community space for people to just be themselves with one another,” said Byrnes.

He hopes that if Gather can catch on in a small town, “maybe we can apply it in settings where our labels keep us from knowing each other and being curious about each other — who are progressives and conservatives beyond their labels, the rich and the poor, Gazans and Israelis, and all the many ways we divide up the human family?”

You can find out more about Gather at [gatheronthegreen.org](https://gatheronthegreen.org).

*John Flowers is at [johnf@addisonindependent.com](mailto:johnf@addisonindependent.com).*

<https://www.addisonindependent.com/2023/11/30/gather-offers-relief-for-hunger-loneliness/>