

Where Are They Now? Cameron Macleish of 360 Eats

Dalia: [00:00:00] Exciting news. The Zest has been nominated for best podcast in the Creative Loafing Best of the Bay 2026 competition, and we need your vote. Just go to botbtampabay.com, as in Best of the Bay, tampabay.com. Click on entertainment, then click on best podcast and cast your vote for The Zest. Again, that's botbtampabay.com.

If it's easier, just click on the link in the show notes of this episode. Thanks in advance. And speaking of the Best of the Bay, we have been having such a great time catching up with some of our favorite local past Zest guests, and you can hear more about it in this conversation that I had on Florida Matters: Live & Local.

Matthew: Welcome back to Florida Matters: Live and Local. I'm Matthew Peddie. We've talked about food insecurity quite a bit on our show, and Ellen and Cameron Macleish have a unique approach to combating hunger.

[00:01:00] They're a mother-and-son duo who are working to reduce food waste and to tackle food insecurity in northern Pinellas County.

Back in 2022, The Zest host Dalia Colon introduced us to Ellen and Cameron Macleish on her podcast. Their nonprofit, 360 Eats, turns surplus food donations into meals for the hungry and compost for gardeners. Cameron is the executive director, and Ellen, a professional chef, works her magic in the kitchen to turn random ingredient donations into delicious meals.

The Macleishs and their team of volunteers then distribute the meals via a food truck, where hungry people can eat for free. As part of The Zest summer series, Dalia checked back in with Cameron, and Dalia's back with us now. Hey, Dalia.

Dalia: Happy to be here.

Matthew: So what led Cameron and Ellen Macleish to found 360 Eats back in 2020?

Dalia: Well, this was one of those travel moments that ended up changing his life. I don't know if that's happened to some people listening, but, uh, Cameron was actually traveling in Australia. He met up with a community of backpackers who were dumpster diving, and you [00:02:00] know, a lot of people go, "I

don't wanna eat out of a dumpster," but when he realized how much perfectly good food was being thrown away, he came back and teamed up with his mom to form 360 Eats.

Matthew: And here's a, a little slice of Cameron reflecting on that experience. This is in your original interview on The Zest.

Cameron: So it took me a couple weeks, uh, to kind of adjust to their living style, and then eventually they invited me to come on a dumpster diving mission, if you will. And we went out to a local grocery store, and opening up that dumpster for the first time was like opening up a treasure chest.

I could not believe my eyes.

Matthew: I mean, that's interesting, opening up a treasure chest, and then his mom, uh, as you point out, kind of creates delicious meals out of somewhat random ingredients.

Dalia: Yeah. It's kind of like an episode of Chopped or something, like the, the gamification of it. Mm-hmm. So 360 Eats is a little bit different than other food pantries because Ellen has this extensive background.

I mean, she helped open the Fenway and Epicurean Hotels here [00:03:00] in Tampa Bay, so she really has the cooking chops. A lot of food pantries just distribute, like, you know, canned goods and things like that, but 360 Eats actually operates, as you said, out of a food truck. Mm-hmm. So people can go up with dignity and choose what goes into their bowl, you know, a grain, a protein, a veggie, things like that.

Matthew: Dalia, you talked with Cameron again recently. Let's listen to your interview now.

Dalia: How's your mom doing? 'Cause when we spoke, she was your, uh, executive chef. Is she still working with you?

Cameron: Yeah, yeah. So she's still our executive chef. She runs our, uh, community kitchen meal program, which is our free meal program that we offer to, uh, food insecure families, predominantly families living in food deserts across Pinellas County, but we do also do low income senior centers as well, and afterschool, uh, programs for at-risk youth.

So she oversees that whole program. It's mobile, so we- we- we co- we go to the locations and times that are [00:04:00] accessible for folks, um, 'cause one of the big challenges that people with food in- or I guess are experiencing food insecurity deal with here is, uh, transportation, just getting to where the food is.

So, um, so yes, she oversees that, and then we also launched a culinary training program last year with the intention of kind of, uh, what's the s- what's that, uh, that old saying? It's like teach a, teach a man to fish sort of thing, you know. In this case, you know, teach, teach a person to cook, and so we teach them how to cook.

It's a 12-week internship program. We got to pilot it last year with a grant that we got through, um, our partners, Foundation for a Healthy St. Pete, and we were able to trial it with, uh, two young adults, uh, who were former meal recipients actually. So they, they would come up to our, our food truck, that's our primary vessel for, for serving food.

We have this cool mobile food truck with a kitchen and everything on it, and every week they would come and, and, you know, pick up meals for themselves and their families. And so we were able to [00:05:00] extend, uh, an opportunity past meals and say, "Well, hey, do you wanna get paid to learn how to be a chef?" And yeah, they got their ServSafe certification.

Chef Ellen, my mom, was the whole, the, the chef in charge in leading that program, and then, uh, they learned all of the, you know, basic culinary skills that they need to thrive. One intern we got to hire on. He's now one of our, um, prep cooks, and the other intern, uh, we were able to get a job at a bakery because she wants to be a baker, so she's now working at a bakery.

So pretty cool. So yeah, she's, she's oversees all the culinary side of, of things that we do.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, that is so cool. So how are you doing this? How are you able to give away free meals at a time when some of us can barely afford groceries for our own household?

Cameron: There's, there's two, two factors. Uh, first is, is donors.

Uh, people like, uh, um, you know, foundations that give philanthropic grants or, you know, individual [00:06:00] donors. These are what enable the service to continue to thrive and operate in the communities. Without their f- generous

funding support, we wouldn't be able to provide meals for free to folks in the community.

So we've been really fortunate and grateful to have a very, um, small but mighty donor base that's helped supported this work. Um, however, as a smaller nonprofit, you know, with the federal funding cuts that happened last year and, you know, there's many different things at play that are kind of affecting the availability for funding for nonprofits as a whole right now.

You know, we're always looking to bring on more people who wanna back our work and are inspired by what we do and wanna see us grow. So the more, you know, donors and funders we have i-i-in place, the more work we can do and the more, uh, people we can feed. The other thing is, um, our in-kind donations. So we partner with local grocery stores, food distributors, and farms, and they donate their fresh surplus food to us.

So on a monthly [00:07:00] basis right now, we're pulling in around 20,000 pounds worth of fresh food that would have otherwise gone to waste, and that happens for va- a variety of reasons. You know, some of the things that we see more often, uh, than others are, um, you know, maybe they've over-ordered and they have to clear their shelves to make room for stock that's gonna sell better or, you know, they, um, uh, there's Package damage that's happened during the transportation process or handling in the warehouse.

You know, doesn't mean that the food itself has gone bad inside. For example, uh, we get a lot of canned food from one of our food partners, and they oftentimes come in these big cardboard boxes with the cans inside. But, you know, maybe someone's lifting up this 40-pound box and the handle, the cardboard handle tears off.

You know, they can't sell that because it's considered a, a damaged good, so now they... Even though the cans are still perfectly, you know, intact and fit for consumption inside. So we end up getting that. But, but, uh, last year we brought in u- [00:08:00] just under \$400,000 worth of in-kind food donations from, um, a, a variety of, of different food partners in the, the food industry.

And so without their generous contributions, um, you know, our cost would be a lot more because we, we'd have to be purchasing food. Right now we don't purchase anything. It all comes from food donors. So we get everything from, like, meats, uh, to produce, to, you know, seasonings and cooking supplies and, you know, starches like pasta and rice, you name it.

So because we get such a variety of, you know, in-kind food donations, not only are we b- able to ensure that, you know, we keep our food costs at, at next to nothing, uh, or nothing I should say, but it also allows us to ensure that we're, we're providing a variety of, of meal options to the f- the folks in the community, and we're also, uh, providing a, a well-balanced, nutritious meal, 'cause that's another big piece to what we do is, is the nutrition.

We wanna make sure that people aren't just getting food, but they're [00:09:00] getting food that, you know, nourishes them.

Dalia: So in addition to reducing or in some cases completely eliminating food waste, which is incredible, you're also now teaching people to cook. Like you said, teach a man to fish. Why is it so important for people, especially people who are food insecure, to learn how to cook?

Cameron: Yeah, I, so I don't have hard data on not having access to fresh things like produce and, you know, high-quality meats and things like that. But I mean, your, your nutrition has a really strong play in, in your health. Um, you know, food is medicine. There's this big food is medicine movement that's going on right now, and, uh, you know, I think a lot of people are starting to, like, uh, understand the value of what we put into our, our bellies, you know, and how that has an impact on our health.

Yeah.

Dalia: So, so what's next for you? Are you still based in Oldsmar?

Cameron: Wow, [00:10:00] it has been a while since we spoke last. Yeah, that was several years ago. Um, so we have just moved, uh, so, uh, shortly after that, we moved into a church, uh, Trinity Presbyterian Church off of Gulf to Bay in Clearwater. Um, and they had a commercial kitchen that they weren't using.

Um, so they've been absolutely amazing. Um, we were able to kind of relocate our headquarters and our operations out of, out of that church. They gave us access to food storage space and an office and everything like that. Um, however, unfortunately, we have outgrown the space. Um, so we just did a capital campaign early this year to raise funding to help us move into our own, um, dedicated, uh, kitchen space, and we were successful.

We actually exceeded, um, our goal. And so right now we're in the process of looking for, um, our next, our next home. It's a bit of a challenge. You know, we were looking for kind of a turnkey restaurant setup, [00:11:00] um, but those are

few and far between, and it's incredibly competitive. They oftentimes get snatched up before they even go on the market.

So we're looking at kind of a couple other options. So if anyone listening knows of any spaces in Pinellas County that has a kitchen, uh, please let us know.

Dalia: Very cool. Okay, so if somebody wants to volunteer or they have a pristine commercial kitchen just sitting there unused and they wanna give it to you, how can people get in touch with you?

Cameron: Uh, yeah, so you can email us. Um, our email is info@360eats.org. Um, I encourage everyone to check out our website, 360eats.org. Um, it's got all of the information on who we are and what we do.

Dalia: I'm so happy that you outgrew your last space and now you're outgrowing your current space. Yeah. What a great problem to have.

Cameron: Yeah.

Dalia: Tell your mom I said hi.

Cameron: I will. I will. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dalia: Awesome. It was good to talk to you, Cameron.

Cameron: You as well. Well,

Matthew: that was, uh, The Zest, Dalia Colon talking with Cameron Macleish of 360 Eats, and we're gonna check in, uh, with Dalia in a [00:12:00] couple of weeks.