

BY ADRIENNE DYER PHOTO BY GARY MCKINSTRY

*Feeding the
heart and soul
in Sidney*



Musician Christian Bergen, left, and Sidney entrepreneur Jim Townley, donated their time and talent to produce a CD for the local food bank.

BY THE TIME Christian Bergen was in high school in Mill Bay, he was well acquainted with poverty. Picked on by classmates for his shabby clothes and enduring poor living conditions at home, Bergen grew up a stranger to the kind of security many of us take for granted. But from an early age, he found solace in two things: music, and the support of local food banks, on which he and his family relied.

“It was hard for us to go down to the food bank and ask for help,” remembers Bergen, 28. “But we were sure glad the service was there.”

Today, this seasoned singer, guitarist and songwriter is donating his talents along with eight other Saanich Peninsula acts to help give back to a community service that helped his family through those hard times. A fundraiser CD called *Feed the Soul*, featuring two of Bergen’s original bluesy-country-funk songs, was released in the summer of 2009 to benefit the Sidney Lions Food Bank. Like all the artists featured on the locally produced and recorded CD, Bergen sang, played and wrote his contributions. To date, the project has raised more than \$5,000 dollars for the food bank, which relies solely on community support to operate.

The story behind the CD is as original as the music. It began when local entrepreneur Jim Townley, co-owner of Fresh Cup Roastery Café in Sidney, decided to hold an “open mic” night every Thursday. He asked recorded performer Lucy Ransom, who is also featured on the CD, to host the weekly jam sessions and lend her guitar, voice and energy to keep the music going even during the darkest winter nights.

“The talent that emerged from the woodwork was astounding,” says Townley. “We quickly realized there was something truly special going on here.” Before long, Thursday Night Open Mic was drawing crowds and Townley spotted a perfect opportunity to funnel some of that success back into the community.

“The idea for the CD came out of a small food hamper drive we held just before Christmas (2008),” Townley explains. “I thought that with all of the original material the musicians had been playing, we could put the two components together with some success,” he said. Food and music seemed the perfect combination.

With the help of his friend, T.W. Tobin, a local recording engineer with a home-based studio, Townley jumped into the role of first-time music producer, creating the Sidney Acoustic Idol competition — now called the Community Music Project — to select artists for the CD. Of the 15 acts that auditioned, Townley (also a singer with a local band) chose nine, who range in age from their early 20s to 50s. While some are seasoned performers — like Barry Perrin, The Cary Tardif Trio, Mowbray & Mills, and Siân Elen — others, like Liam Hildebrand, Landon Crawford and Gio Linguanti (the album’s youngest performers) had never set foot inside a recording studio.

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“It takes a lot of time and effort to put something like this together,” says Ransom, a Nova Scotia native who took up the guitar and started writing music in her teens. “It’s a real feather in everyone’s cap. Plus, it meant a lot to each of us to be able to help our community.” Lisa Ogden, who has performed professionally with husband Stephen since the early 1990s, says that the desire to help people within the community is a common thread that binds *Feed the Soul’s* artists together. “This will sound cliché,” she says,

“but it’s true — we have been given so much, so I believe the only way to be tangibly thankful is to give back.”

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Beverley Elder, who has served as the Sidney Lions Food Bank administrator for nine years, says that the CD project has helped increase awareness about the challenges facing so many people close to home. “The Sidney Food Bank has existed for 26 years, yet many locals don’t know it exists,” she says. And while many of us think to donate funds and provisions at Christmas time, food banks often get forgotten during the rest of the year. As Elder says, “hunger knows no season.”

So far, funds from *Feed the Soul* have helped Elder restock basic items that had run dangerously low. Since the food bank helps an average of 315 households per month, proceeds from fundraisers like *Feed the Soul* directly benefit about 850 Peninsula residents, more than a third of them children under 16. Elder and her team of 30 volunteers turn every \$1 donated into \$2 worth of purchasing power. “It’s definitely a privilege to be able to help people in this way.”

“I’m sure at one point in our lives we’ve all experienced poverty, or at least known someone who has,” says Bergen, who has learned not to take anything for granted, not even basics like food and shelter. “Projects like this bring out the good in everyone.”

Recording eight performers for a second CD is taking place this month, says Townley, with the CD release planned for the end of May. Townley also hopes other communities will become inspired to do something similar and says he will gladly share everything he knows about the process in hopes that the idea will catch on.

Feed the Soul is available at *Fresh Cup Roastery* (Saanichton and Sidney), *The Sidney Pier Hotel and Spa*, *Knickerbocker’s* in Brentwood Bay, and *Monk Office* in Sidney. You can also keep track of fundraising efforts at westcoastacoustic.ca. **VB**



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