

MITCH ALBOM

Mitch Albom: Breaking bread with police to break down barriers

Mitch Albom Detroit Free Press

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On Wednesday, at the same time a Kentucky attorney general was announcing findings in the Breonna Taylor case, a small group of men and women gathered on Detroit's east side to eat some barbecue they had cooked outside together.

And as cities across America saw protesters chanting angrily, further igniting the divide between citizens and police, the folks in Detroit, some as young as 20, some approaching 60, finished their ribs and chicken around a table and began to talk.

And as cops in Louisville braced for a night of verbal abuse and potential violence, the people at the Detroit table introduced themselves to one another.

Up to that point, they had merely been part of a shared grilling and eating experience. Now one man revealed he'd been incarcerated for years but "was getting my life back together." Another said he'd had a tough upbringing and run-ins with the law, but was trying to stay on track "for my kids."

Eventually, a few of the older attendees stated their names and said they worked "for the city." When pressed as to what they did for the city, they said they were police officers.

A few eyebrows raised. But nobody left the table. And what ensued was more than an hour of honest talk, real communication between people who, having already broken bread with one another, were honestly trying to understand each other.

This was no accidental lunch. In fact, there have been three such get-togethers this month, with more scheduled in the coming weeks. It's part an initiative we created at S.A.Y. Detroit called "Better Together," with a subset called "Willin', Grillin' and Healin'."

Table by table, it's working.

Food brings us together

I'm a huge fan of eating. I don't have an elite palate. And I'll never be a foodie. But the act of eating, of sitting down with people and sharing a meal, has been a cornerstone of my life. Raised by parents who insisted the entire family eat together every night, without television or radio interruption, I came to love a full table and lots of loud talk and laughter. And I still grow nostalgic for standing behind my grandmother as she cooked up something on the stove or grill, in a pot or a frying pan, and I handed her the ingredients and felt a kinship in the preparation.

So when it came to trying to bridge the yawning gap between at-risk citizens and local police, we at S.A.Y. Detroit figured that food, plates and a table were better than helmets, sticks and megaphones. One neighborhood at a time, we are gathering small groups of cops, activists, former inmates and at-risk youth, who arrive in casual clothes and don't know who is who when they start to cook together and eat together and, after the natural hesitation is broken down, talk together.

The meats and mobile grill are provided by the amazing Jack Aronson and his son, Trevor, of Jack's Roadside BBQ in Clarkston. The locations are provided by various Detroit groups. And the program itself is administered by a stocky man named Darryl Woods, 48, who was hired by S.A.Y Detroit as the program coordinator for Better Together.

Woods went to prison when he was very young. Since getting out, he has turned his fate around, organizing youth programs, becoming a minister, and winning the Great Expectations award by the Detroit chapter of the NAACP.

<https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/local/food-by-table-better-together-detroit>

This year, with so many companies looking to show their support for the community, we are issuing “The Popcorn Pledge Challenge,” in which we ask local businesses — small, medium and large — to consider giving the gift of gourmet popcorn to their employees and clients this year. Instead of an engraved pen, a T-shirt, or yet another fruitcake, why not give small or large holiday tins of delicious cheese, caramel, butter, cinnamon bun, Oreo, sour apple or peanut butter crunch popcorn — and have 100% of the profits go to help the community? Isn’t that the message businesses want to send to their people this year?

Any business that orders tins before Oct. 15th will have guaranteed shipment to them or straight to their clients/employees in December. There is no minimum or maximum order. It may feel early for the holidays. But it’s not early to start thinking how you’re going to honor them, especially in this crazy, challenging year.

All you have to do is go to brownbagpopcorn.com/pledge, or visit or phone the Brown Bag Popcorn store on the third floor of Somerset Collection North.

Because food cuts through to the best of us. It brings cops and at-risk citizens to the table together, it nourishes the souls of young students so they can learn, it brings smiles at the holidays.

Maybe sharing a plate of barbecue or a tin of popcorn doesn’t solve every problem our nation faces. But it’s the start of what that young man said. Respect. Couldn’t we use more of that these days?

Contact Mitch Albom: malbom@freepress.com. Check out the latest updates with his charities, books and events at MitchAlbom.com. Download “The Sports Reporters” podcast each Monday and Thursday on-demand through Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify and more. Follow him on Twitter @mitchalbom.