

Interview with Nikki Glahn, founder of the popular Barrie Families Unite group on Facebook.

Tell me about yourself, your background and your connection to Barrie.

My family moved to Barrie 12 years ago in February from British Columbia. Despite the intimidating snow banks and coldness, we thought Barrie was very family focused and liked that. My husband works in the Toronto area, but we thought Toronto wasn't an ideal place for our young kids who were 1 and 3 at the time.

My background is in marketing and communications and I spent years in a senior role working for a boating company before stepping away to raise my kids. I did launch a consulting business, but have not held a full-time job until March.

What happened in March?

By nature, I'm a gatherer of people – I really enjoy it. While listening to the radio, when things were changing by the hour, we were being told that the kids were not going back to school and we started hearing things like 'social distancing.' I was getting concerned about how people were going to stay connected as a community while they were being told to not be together. People were also in a state of high anxiety and confronted with so much information.

So on March 14th at 9 pm I walked out of my home office and told my husband that I might have done something that may alter the trajectory of my next couple of months. I launched Barrie Families Unite (BFU) on Facebook. It was created as a place for us to stay together, be connected and facilitate finding help – basically, connect the people who needed help with the helpers. Some influential people in Barrie supported me, so by day 3 or 4, we had 4,000 followers. Today, with zero marketing, we have nearly 11,000 BFU members.

How did you create and evolve this online community?

Our team set clear ground rules from day one. Negativity is not allowed. No senseless debate, no judgemental type statements, no shaming. We were carving out one space in our local social media scene where there would be no negativity. Just help, details on programs and new health-related information. All posts are vetted before sharing, and we moderate the comments to ensure kindness.

At the start, a lot of COVID-related information and was flowing. For example, "How do I get my prescription refilled if I'm worried about going inside a pharmacy?" The community was quick to respond with options that they had already worked out. People would weigh in and share their experience and ideas.



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During the first week though, we also found people were falling through the cracks – single moms who could not get to the Food Bank for example. So we used the power of grassroots connections to help these people. A lot was happening organically where the facilitators didn't have to get involved – we just let others help others. Sometimes we would post anonymous requests for those in need for food for example. The members have helped a lot of people!

Some people in the group have become landmarks. One lady contributor goes out everyday and takes pictures. She has a following of people who look forward to those photos. They set their clocks to go to the page to look at those posts! People write in that "...they help my mental health so much." and "Gave me so much joy." This is an example of the section in the online forum of Uplifting Posts.

Through the many active posts and members of BFU, what have been some of the recurring needs you have seen in the community?

They are typically food and clothing related. The essentials. Food, medical devices like walkers, and kids clothing for each season. BFU stepped in whenever there were repetitive trends and didn't see an agency that was addressing it. For example, with food – we don't want to reinvent the wheel – the Barrie Food Bank is excellent. We are just filling in the gaps. We work with people and have a check system in place to make sure they are using the resources the city has already. And if it's not a good fit or no program can fulfill their need, we will post to ask the community. We've facilitated hundreds of food deliveries/donations/porch pick ups.

For clothing, we noticed in May that retail stores had not fully opened and the temperature was going up. People were asking for clothes for their kids. There was no place to send them, so we had a kids' clothing bank. We accepted donations, laundered them and sorted them by size and made up bags of clothing based on online requests – like the gender and size of clothing. We made about 45 to 55 of these summer clothing bags and had drivers drop them off. We allow clothing posts outside of these events to organically keep up with ongoing needs.

We also did a Beat the Heat campaign where we matched people in need with donated fans and A/C units. We used the power of the people. At that point, we had 10,000 members and put out a call for these items and asked for donations. We also did a Go Fund Me campaign to buy portable A/C units and matched what we received to those who completed the online request form. Every person who asked for an A/C unit themselves had, or someone in their family had a medical issue that was exasperated by heat.

What are some of the greatest acts of kindness or generosity you have seen in BFU?

So many. As a general statement it's the immediate reaction we get when we put up an anonymous post. People quickly jump in. One story sticks out about a single mom with 3 kids. Her middle child was having a birthday. This child has had major health challenges throughout his life. The mom didn't reach out to BFU, but someone else did who knew the mom was overwhelmed and wanting to make this birthday special. So we posted a blurb about it and people were dropped off inflated balloons, found out what he likes, were getting him gifts. One lady was picking them up a birthday cake with her two kids and she started crying. Her kids were like "Why were you crying?!" This mom explained to her two kids that they were buying a birthday cake for a mom who's struggling and wants to make it a special day for her son who's suffering with medical challenges. That opened up a conversation with her kids about what is happening in the community, the suffering and struggles, and how they can help.

The key learning is that people love helping other people. Many people thank us for providing them these opportunities to help.

How do you make sure those asking for help actually need it?

The BFU team guards the hearts and kindness of its members. We don't want any of our members to be taken advantage of. It's a group of volunteers, so we want to protect them. All posts go into a holding area and get vetted, and the volunteers approve or deny them. Often, if we feel it's a dishonest ask, we ask one or two good probing questions and they leave the community. We've become pretty good at this.

It seems like a lot of oversight is needed, which means a lot of people need to be monitoring the site. How does BFU manage this level of monitoring?

We have three administrators, including me, and about 20 volunteer moderators on the team. We have shifts from say 9 am to 9 pm. Moderators sign up for shifts to watch the feed and check it every 15 minutes or so. We administrators are there to help the moderators. We currently are in need of more moderators. Our admins are often monitoring too, as we often don't have anyone signed up to cover the shifts.

Do you often find that one of the biggest obstacles to finding help is just knowing where to look? Have any of your group members experienced this?

Sometimes. For example, I have nothing but praise for the Food Bank and how they adapted to being more accessible. However, we often run into situations where someone needs food and who has used the Food Bank before, can't get out, but didn't



know that it delivered. So I will explain the details to them. It's not just knowing what is available but also how the programs have changed to better serve during COVID-19.

We suggest calling 211 a lot – our mandate is to connect people to different agencies.

Where do you see BFU going, evolving?

At this moment, we will continue to use the model of BFU – react quickly and have pop-up campaigns to react to larger needs. We need to remain clear about how can we affect the most positive change and be the most effective we can be. Do we need to evolve the model? Yes, and we are doing so on a continual basis.

