



COMMUNITY

Club raising \$300K for teaching kitchen



Moncef Lakouas, executive-director of BGC Moncton, says the club is now raising \$300,000 to renovate and modernize the kitchen into a facility that can prepare hundreds of meals and also be used to teach children how to cook for themselves.
Photo: Alan Cochrane/Times & Transcript

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The kitchen at BGC Moncton, formerly known as the Boys and Girls Club, isn't much larger than what you'd find in the average home, but Moncef Lakouas has a dream of upgrading it into a place where children will learn how to cook healthy meals.

"We want to expand it so we can bring the kids inside, where they will have their own stations where they can cook," said Lakouas, executive-director of BGC Moncton. The organization looks after approximately 160 children daily, with daycare and after-school programs with tutoring, alternative classroom training, leadership, job placement, entrepreneurship and other skills.

The kitchen in the 60-year-old building on Everett Street in Moncton's north end is very basic, with a couple of regular ovens, fridges and freezers. It is used now to prepare meals for 100 children a day, and 600 during summer camps. There's currently no space for children to get involved. The BGC recently launched a campaign to raise \$300,000 for upgrades that will include modern equipment and workstations for the children. Construction is planned to begin in the spring of 2024.

Plans for the new kitchen include lots of storage, an eight-burner range, convection oven, hot serving table and workstations with stools, so it will be a place to both prepare meals and teach classes.

The idea is to help children and their families break the cycle of poverty at a time when the price of food is rising rapidly and people need to learn how to prepare nutritious meals on a budget.

"Cooking for yourself and eating healthy is part of a good lifestyle. It is an art," he said. "We are putting hope on the menu."

He says cooking classes for children will help build social skills, team work, self-reliance and self-esteem. Once the kitchen is rebuilt, they could invite nutritionists and others for cooking classes with the children. There will also be partnerships with schools for community gardens where food is grown, and education on how to go grocery shopping.

"This platform will allow our cook to prepare 150 meals a day in a timely manner, and give children as young as six the education they need about food," Lakouas said. BGC Moncton serves almost 75,000 nutritious meals and snacks to more than 1,000 children a year, and demand for their services has doubled from two years ago.

"We want to ensure Greater Moncton children and youth have more access to healthy food as well, that they know where it comes from and how to prepare it," Lakouas said. "For some of our children, they rely on our meal programs on a daily basis. By giving them the tools to cook healthy, nutritious meals safely themselves, they can increase their own food literacy as well as be able to help their households with cooking, a skill that will serve them into adulthood."

The kitchen fundraising campaign will be underway for the next 18 months. Donations of funds, or in-kind products and services are welcome. Earlier this year, the club unveiled a major renovation to a classroom, which received funding from both the federal and provincial governments.

As the kitchen renovation project begins to raise funds, Lakouas said a \$370,000 project to refurbish the gymnasium will begin in January. The gym upgrade will include a new floor, basketball nets and lighting.

The club also wrapped up a six-month campaign to raise more than \$100,000 for a new 24-seat bus, which is scheduled to arrive in the spring.

BGC Moncton celebrated its 65th anniversary this year and was named non-profit organization of the year in the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton Business Excellence Awards. The organization offers a variety of programming for children and youth, six days a week, including summer camps, an early learning centre, after school programs, educational support, leadership programs and newcomer services.

• *Donations to the club's kitchen renovation project can be made through the website at bgcmoncton.com.*