“We can totally figure this out! We can do this! That’s something Williston instilled in us.” Sarah Williams Carlan ’92, P’21, ’23 is talking about values, problem-solving, and giving back to her community. The leadership coach, along with culinary agent Sally Ekus ’03 and chef Laura Bowman ’13 (and plenty of non-Williston folks), has been working on a collaborative fundraiser for two groups hit hard by the pandemic: the local restaurant industry and the Treehouse Foundation, a 60-home community in Easthampton designed to support foster families and elders.

That fundraising effort is Stir Up Some Love, a subscription-based, 15-episode video series of local chefs demonstrating their most iconic recipes. “COVID gave us lemons,” goes the project’s tagline. “We’re thinking, ‘Mmmmm…lemon meringue pie.’ With your donation, everyone gets a slice!” Carlan, who chairs the fundraising and development committee at Treehouse, explains that, in a normal year, their biggest annual fundraiser is a big-donor, big-ask, invite-only event hosted by Coco and the Cellar Bar in Easthampton. This was obviously not the year for that—and Coco, like other restaurants, was itself hurting as well. A flurry of meetings and brainstorming, involving what she describes as “committee-wide brilliance,” generated the collaboration—an approach that would mutually benefit the impacted folks (proceeds are evenly split between the restaurants and the nonprofit) and nourish its donors as well.

So far, the project is proving delicious. Michaelangelo Wescott of Gypsy Apple in Shelburne Falls shows off a signature salade niçoise; Casey Douglas from Galaxy in Easthampton makes his famous carbonara; and Unmi Abkin and Roger Taylor of Coco and the Cellar Bar prepare their delectable honey miso noodle salad. And there’s a plan for a second season, too, with Bowman, who owns the Blue Door Gatherings catering company and is collaborating with Abkin on Tula, a plant-based meal subscription program, due to add a video of her own. Ekus would like to see this project become a model for the culinary community: “Giving back to local nonprofits and supporting the restaurant community too.” And she actually knows a ton about both. After Williston, she earned her B.A. at Ithaca College, then considered starting a masters in social work (MSW) program. But home for a break in Hatfield, she had a change of heart. Her mother is Lisa of the Lisa Ekus Group, a culinary talent and literary agency, and Ekus realized that all of her skills—especially active listening—were wholly transferrable to working with cookbook authors. “What do you love personally that you can contribute to in this world?” That’s what Williston asks. And for me, it’s this—this work—and the giving back.”

For Carlan, “Being at Williston taught me about having a connected community—and to look for those places in my life where people were supporting one another.” She graduated from Mount Holyoke before getting her MSW from Smith and moving to Conway. Now her own kids go to Williston, and she describes herself as “a therapist and facilitator, wife and mother, avid equestrian, and agent of adaptability.” It’s this last, perhaps most of all, that she brings to her work with Stir Up Some Love.

“This campaign is such a good example of alumni coming together through shared values and then finding out we’re Williston alums!” says Ekus. “Williston produces a lot of people who invest in causes that are important to them.” Carlan echoes this: “You feel that instant connection to them and then later you realize you’re both Williston alums. It’s hard to put your finger on,” she adds, “but there’s this feeling, this community we all share. There’s that thread that connects us.”

—Catherine Newman

From left: Sarah Carlan ’92, Laura Bowman ’13, and Sally Ekus ’03 have teamed up to raise money for two groups hit hard by the pandemic—local restaurants and the Treehouse Foundation.

Top Chefs
These local restauranteurs are participating in the Stir Up Some Love series, at left, by sharing recipes, techniques, and inspiration in how-to videos. Just donate, watch, and cook up something lovely!

Capt. Jack’s Roadside Shack | cod cakes rémoulade
Coco and the Cellar Bar | honey miso noodle salad
Five Eyed Fox | pan-fried hake with creamed corn
Mesa Verde | onion-rosemary focaccia
Small Oven | decorate a cake like a pro
Treeshouse | Stir Up Some Love