

From ER Shifts to Meijer Shelves: One Nurse Practitioner's Healthy Mission

Finding healthy food during a busy hospital shift inspired one West Michigan entrepreneur to create The Meal Bar, which is now reaching more families in partnership with Meijer.

When Thad Cummings started making whole-food meal bars, he wasn't planning to launch a food company. As a nurse during the COVID-19 pandemic studying to become a nurse practitioner, he often spent long days in the emergency room with little time to eat.

That idea grew into a Grand Rapids company, The Meal Bar, that makes healthy meal bars with local ingredients and that also cares about the environment. Long-term, Thad hopes the business will support Seek Listen Partner, the nonprofit he founded to help communities around the world through preventive healthcare and community development projects.

"I would make the bars and bring them in," Thad said. "At some point it kind of evolved from there. Could it be a healthy alternative option? Then I realized my background. I was much more successful in business, and that would be that avenue to fund the nonprofit."

Unlike many meal bars, Thad's recipes don't rely on protein powders, imported ingredients or chemical stabilizers. Instead, he uses ingredients such as Michigan honey, nuts and locally sourced fruit whenever possible.

"Our three pillars are healthy eating, environmental impact with local sourcing, and then, of course, our nonprofit initiatives for using it as a way to educate people and give back," he said.

Those values have connected with customers across West Michigan who want products made close to home while supporting a larger mission.

Thad spent four years developing The Meal Bar recipes before introducing six flavors: Blueberry Bliss, Apricot Crunch, Cherry Delight, Apple Meadow, Peach Blossom and Strawberry Jam. The bars are produced in Grand Rapids.

Bringing the bars to Meijer marks a milestone for the growing business. After attending food shows, product demonstrations and meetings with our merchandising team over several years, Thad's products recently expanded into 51 Meijer stores, made possible by the retailer's local products program.

Working with Meijer allows The Meal Bar to introduce its products to more customers across the Midwest while continuing to manufacture the bars in West Michigan.

"Meijer is a really beautiful launching opportunity for the Midwest," Thad said. "The hope is that we can do well and get a permanent place in the stores and expand out regionally."

Thad hopes this opportunity will help his business continue to grow while supporting the nonprofit work that inspired the company from the beginning.

"It's a really big, exciting opportunity for us because this is what'll ultimately fund everything and get the mission out there," he said.

"The goal is hopefully next year, I will fund the nonprofit less, and the business will fund it more. That would be the dream."

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