“Baking up joy for essential workers is the sweetest treat!”

After being furloughed, Chef Tracy Wilk decided to bake goodies for nurses, first responders and grocery store workers—and soon, her #BakelForward movement spread sprinkles of hope across the nation!

There’s no way I can eat all these sweets myself, Chef Tracy Wilk thought as she pulled another batch of snickerdoodle cookies out of the oven. There has to be someone I can share these with...

After being furloughed from her job as a pastry chef and instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education, the New York City resident turned to baking to cope with the stress of living in the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. From her tiny studio apartment kitchen, Tracy was up to her elbows in dozens of homemade treats. I might as well share them with those who truly deserve them, she decided, cueing up her Facebook page.

“I’m a pastry chef and will be doing a lot of baking these next few weeks since I’m out of work, Tracy posted in a local group with several health-care workers from New York University Langone Medical Center. If I were to bake and donate treats to the hospital, would you guys eat them?

One nurse replied, Yes please! ER nurse here—We could use all the morale boost we can get! Another nurse chimed in, I work in one of the COVID-19 units at NYU-Cornell, and this would make our entire ward.

And as the replies from nurses came flooding in, Tracy began baking with a new purpose.

Serving up sweet hope

The next morning, Tracy organized her fresh goodies into boxes and prepared for her first cookie delivery outside the NYU hospital.

“I hope this makes your day!” she smiled as she handed over the treats, hope filling her heart. Though she couldn’t see her smiling through her mask, Tracy could see the joy dancing in the nurse’s eyes. “It already has!” Thrilled, Tracy snapped a photo and posted it to her Instagram with the hashtag #BakelForward and a message: Dropping off sweet ‘thanks’ to those on the front lines. Anyone else joining in?

Almost immediately, people promised to begin baking, and one of Tracy’s friends replied, I would love to support you! Can I send you a donation?

Soon after, even more people who couldn’t bake themselves began reaching out to ask Tracy how they could donate money for her to buy supplies. And within a matter of days, Tracy received dozens of donations totaling over $2,000 to fund all the ingredients needed to continue her baking—and spreading hope to frontline workers across the city.

Cookie by cookie

As the initiative spread from baking for hospital workers to police officers, firefighters and even grocery store clerks, enthusiastic home bakers, chefs and Tracy’s own culinary students began posting photos on social media of their own safely delivered homemade sweets and her #BakelForward hashtag to let others know what they were doing.

Hey, chef! You have inspired me, and I’m starting this in Philly now. I have raised $600, and have ICU nurses ready for deliveries, wrote one culinary student. Thank you for the idea! Rebuilding hope—one cookie at a time!

One home baker posted a photo of her cookies and wrote, I’ve been wanting to bake cookies for three weeks and #BakelForward motivated me! So, soon the hashtag began to go viral, along with the news about all the joy she was creating in her tiny apartment.

But what warmed Tracy’s heart most were the responses she received from those on the front lines.

It kept us moving and shows us that people are cheering us on, one nurse wrote in a grateful message. So touching that Tracy now plans to turn #BakelForward into a cookbook filled with recipes and stories from essential workers about how the simple treats brought smiles to their faces.

“I try to live my life with the goal of helping others. I think we’re stronger together, and giving back is one of the most rewarding things you can do,” says Tracy, who notes that even after the pandemic passes, she hopes her movement of gratitude for our frontline workers continues to spread.

“They’ve been working overtime, and as a chef, I know what that feels like. I don’t think a cookie is going to solve their problems, but it is a little sprinkle of joy to make the day better.” —Maggie Dillard

#BakelForward in 3 steps!

1. Reach out! Reach out to workers in your area before making your delivery to ensure your treats are a go. Either call, message, via Facebook or download the free Next Door app to connect with medical workers and first responders in your area. Or, as Tracy suggests, call a local police station or firehouse!

2. Make sweet treats! While Chef Tracy recommends baking goodies like cookies or bars for workers to eat on the go, you can try an old family recipe or one of Tracy’s specialities like ‘Sprinkle Some Joy’ cookies or M&M’s oatmeal cookies. Visit ChefTracyWilk.com, click the “#BakelForward” tab, and then click “Recipes.”

3. Drop off your treats! Package your treats in individual baggies or cellophane and arrange a time to drop them off—but for now, make sure you can do it contactless. Wear a face mask, gloves and deliver curbside to a nurse or staffer.

“Giving back is the most rewarding thing you can do—especially to our health heroes!”

“Police, firefighters and grocery store clerks share in the yummy fun”