

Meet Lisa Knudsen, Stephanie Short and Lexi Cire of Erie UpLink

<http://voyagedenver.com/interview/meet-lisa-knudsen-stephanie-short-lexi-cire-erie-uplink-erie/>

Today we'd like to introduce you to Lisa Knudsen, Stephanie Short and Lexi Cire.

So, before we jump into specific questions, why don't you give us some details about you and your story.

Erie UpLink co-founders and co-directors Lisa Knudsen, Stephanie Short & Lexi Cire. Founded in 2011: Erie UpLink's vision is a community of caring in Erie, Colorado, where folks work together to fulfill the basic life needs of every Erie child and family. Our MISSION is to connect Erie families with resources to fulfill their basic life needs. Our DESIRE is to provide hope and to demonstrate care for one another.

As three moms, we saw a need in our children's schools and in our neighborhoods for responsive help with temporary life needs including food and clothing. Erie is a community with a real heart to care for one another, we founded Erie UpLink as a "link" between those who have a need and those who desire to give.

Erie UpLink has remained committed to linking needs with resources by cultivating collaborative relationships and doing a few things with great care. Our main program, Tiger Packs food-filled backpacks, is truly "Erie folks feeding Erie folks" and is the vehicle for most of our services to Erie students and their families.

We started with 11 Tiger Packs and worked out of our basements. About two years ago, we outgrew Lisa's basement (supplies were spilling over into Lexi's basement as well) so we rented a 650 square foot space in Erie Village. This has enabled us to utilize larger volunteer groups like the Erie High School CR5 Choir and First National Bank's Community Team, as well as to store food and items collected by our community partners any time of year.



From left: Lexi Cire, Stephanie Short, Lisa Knudsen

We're always bombarded by how great it is to pursue your passion, etc – but we've spoken with enough people to know that it's not always easy. Overall, would you say things have been easy for you?

The community in Erie has been on board with our mission from day 1, folks in our town are compassionate and generous and desire to make sure kids have the food they need to learn and be healthy. So collecting food for our Tiger Packs has been a smooth road. We are unique in that all of our food and the supplemental seasonal items like hats and gloves, Christmas stockings and personal care items are donated by Erie organizations and individuals.

We do not receive grants or food bank food. We also have an abundance of willing and enthusiastic volunteers who help with everything from hosting food drives to packing Tiger Packs to organizing activities Monday through Thursday in June and July for our Summer Lunch in the Park. Our Erie schools and the St Vrain Valley School District have been exceptional partners and have helped us shape our programs to meet the needs of area students and families.

We have had to be very purposeful in staying true to our mission. There are a lot of needs and we struggle to say no, especially to families we know are hurting. We have amazing partners, so we link families with the right resources as often as we can. We serve only our 7 Erie schools, so we have had to say no to needs from nearby communities. We would love to help other schools or communities start their own food assistance or summer lunch programs, and are working right now with Niwot High School to start a student pantry like the one we have at Erie High School.

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Meet Lisa Knudsen, Stephanie Short and Lexi Cire of Erie UpLink, cont.

So, as you know, we're impressed with Erie UpLink – tell our readers more, for example what you're most proud of and what sets you apart from others.

We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit in our tenth year serving the Erie community. Our main program is Tiger Packs- food-filled backpacks sent home with students from 7 Erie schools with non-perishable, kid-friendly food items to supplement children's healthy diets over the long weekend or holiday break. Students take the food-filled backpack home on the last day of school before a long break and return the empty backpack when they go back to school. Families request Tiger Packs based upon their financial need for food assistance.

We treasure our relationships within the greater community. All of our feeder schools have joined in paying close attention to the needs of students and families. We partner with other organizations- Erie Churches, Crayons-to-Calculators, the two food banks in Erie, Collegiate Crossings, A Woman's Work, Town of Erie, Erie Community Library, St Vrain School District, EHS Ed Foundation, Optimist, and A Precious Child- to help families meet a variety of needs. Things that set us apart are connection and relationship. We are able to connect folks in the community (NJHS, Banks, Youth Groups, Family Groups, Scouts, Church Groups) with opportunities to serve. Also, we are three Erie moms who have volunteered our time for ten years to love on our hometown.

So, what's next? Any big plans?

Erie UpLink has evolved over the years. We started with just 11 Tiger Packs in 2011. At that time, we were small enough to help families with other life essentials. One year, in partnership with Calvary Bible Church of Erie, we empowered folks to "Love Your Neighbor" by performing small projects for neighbors in need. As our town and community needs have grown, we have had to narrow our focus – our resources can only stretch so far.

Tiger Packs is now our main program and the vehicle through which we distribute not just food resources, but other helpful items such as stockings at Christmas, new hats, gloves and socks, toiletries and school supplies.

We partner with Collegiate Crossings to help a few of the families we have worked most closely with over the years to rise out of poverty through education- we scholarship students to work for four years with Collegiate Crossings for post-secondary planning. We had our first two students graduate from Erie High School in 2019. Both are finding success in college. We have more students graduating in the next couple of years. This will be our third summer partnering with St Vrain Valley School District, the Town of Erie and area organizations to serve Lunch in the Park, a free hot lunch provided for children 18 and under at Coal Miners Park.

We are pulled in many directions, but year after year we keep our focus on doing a few things well and with great love, sticking closely to our mission of connecting Erie folks to serve one another. Volunteers will continue to be a huge part of our future, as will our partnerships with our Erie schools. Now that we've outgrown our basements and are paying rent, we have to focus more on fundraising. We are always evolving with the needs of the families we serve.

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