

MILK MARKET

By Shannon Linden

FROM THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S campaign to promote breastfeeding as the best way to nourish young infants to those milk-mustached celebrities endorsing nature's beverage, the message is creamy clear: Got milk? Use

but what if you don't have milk? What if you are a woman who, for various health-related reasons, postpartum complications, or a lack of experience, has trouble keeping up the supply to deal with the demand? What if you adopted your child? What if you are a single father? For desperate parents longing to breastfeed their babies, a milk sharing initiative birthed on Facebook promises to deliver.

Welcome, Eats on Feets (EOF); a user group devoted to the idea that when it comes to feeding your baby, breast is best—even if it's someone else's.

Launched on the social networking site a few months ago by Montreal mother of three and breastfeeding activist, Emma Kwasnica, EOF is an online space with a mandate

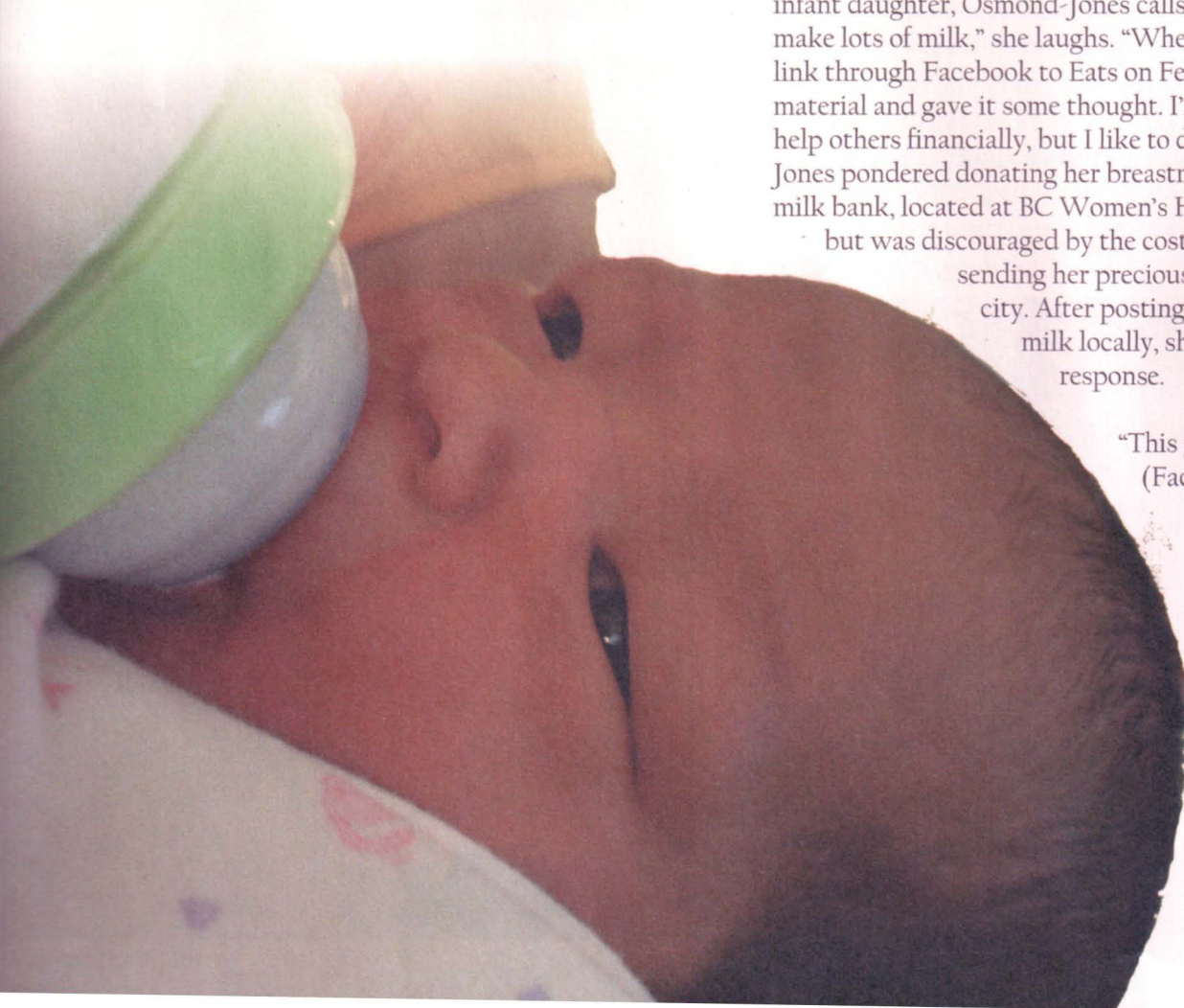
to provide human milk for human babies by connecting mothers with product to spare to parents who can't get enough. Within weeks of its arrival, EOF gained followers in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario. Now, in a matter of months, the movement has gone global, with more than 200 networks in dozens of countries.

Using her personal profile page and connections to international breastfeeding activists, Kwasnica matches up milk donors and recipients around the world. Now regional chapters have created their own Facebook pages where parents in need post requests for breastmilk, just as those wishing to donate post offers in the discussions or on the wall. Ideally parents find matches within their communities and according to Kwasnica, this local aspect increases both the intimacy and safety of milk sharing as parents meet one another for coffee, exchange personal information, medical records if requested, and form bonds.

That's how it worked for 28-year old Kamloops mother of two, Megan Osmond-Jones. Currently breastfeeding her infant daughter, Osmond-Jones calls herself a natural. "I make lots of milk," she laughs. "When my midwife posted a link through Facebook to Eats on Feets, I read through the material and gave it some thought. I'm not in a position to help others financially, but I like to do my part." Osmond-Jones pondered donating her breastmilk to Canada's only milk bank, located at BC Women's Hospital in Vancouver, but was discouraged by the cost and care involved in sending her precious commodity to another city. After posting an offer to donate her milk locally, she was pleased with the response.

"This gal sent me a private (Facebook) message and asked if I could help her out. She is expecting but she also has a toddler who isn't nursing anymore but who has been sick. She came by for milk for her toddler, hoping to boost her daughter's immune system."

Osmond-Jones says



exchange was comfortable and positive. "Her daughter and my son got along for a good hour while we chatted. It's an intimate thing—sharing breast milk—and it's neat that we've become friends."

Many donating mothers cite similarly positive experiences, finding fulfillment in giving of themselves—quite literally—for a worthwhile cause. "I think it's sweet," Osmond-Jones says. "Other cultures pass their babies around to be nursed and it's wonderful."

Turner, a Salmon Arm mother of four (including the 10-month-old she is currently breastfeeding) agrees. "We are part of a global community," she says. "It takes a village to raise a child and if I can help further that concept, I'd like to offer what I can." After a Facebook friend gave the Eats & Feets initiative a thumbs-up, Turner was intrigued and made an offering of her milk. While she has yet to receive requests, she looks forward to helping those in need. "It's the best thing for a baby," she says.

While health experts concur, they disagree any breast milk will be safe. Health Canada and its FDA American counterpart have issued statements opposing the sharing of breast milk, be it from strangers on Facebook or well-known friends. "Breast milk is best but donor milk must come from a properly accredited and licensed donor milk bank," Sharon Unger, mother of three and a pediatrician at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital says.

At one time Canada boasted 23 such banks, all but the Vancouver one shut down in the mid 1980's following concerns about HIV transmission. Principle author of the Canadian Pediatric Society's response to informal breastmilk sharing, Dr. Unger advocates for more such banks, which operate in a manner like blood-donor banks, scrupulously testing and screening donations.

Without such testing, Health Canada worries about the processing of donated breast milk (including sterilization methods, instruments and bottles, handling and storage) and of the medical history of donors. Viruses (including HIV), bacteria that can cause food poisoning, traces of parasites (prescription and otherwise), along with sexually transmitted diseases are all, according to health experts, transferable through breastmilk.

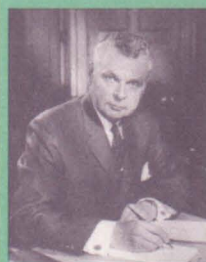
"People can still seroconvert to become HIV positive after initially negative blood tests," Dr. Unger explains. Insisting that hepatitis can be transmitted through breastmilk (a claim the EOF site disputes) Unger says, "We vaccinate their children against Hepatitis B and that's why we still advise hepatitis B positive mothers to breast feed."

Emma Kwasnica and other proponents of EOF suggest the benefits of milk sharing far outweigh the risks (the site suggests even a smoker's breast milk is better than formula). The site offers support and links to resources and encourages recipients to ask some tough and personal questions of donors but insists; ultimately women should be entrusted to make informed decisions about what's best for their children.

Meanwhile, Dr Unger agrees: mother knows best and that's why the biological mom/baby unit works so well together. "Often babies are immune to bacteria in their own mother's breast milk but may not be from another woman's milk," she says.

While EOF suggests stovetop flash pasteurizing to sterilize donated breastmilk, Dr. Unger maintains that's not enough. If done improperly, milk may still contain contaminants and the protein composition may be altered, rendering it less nutritious. "In Canada," Unger asserts, "Formula is a perfectly safe and viable option."

The consensus is this: milk, it does the body good but it's up to parents to decide if the source might be bad.



FEBRUARY 1961

50 Years Ago This Month

3rd - The Canadian Bank of Commerce and the Imperial Bank of Canada merge to form Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce

4th - Denis Savard, NHL center (Chicago Blackhawks) was born in Pointe Gatineau, Quebec.

7th - Jane Fonda made her acting debut in the NBC drama "A String of Beads"

10th - Niagara Falls hydroelectric project began producing power.

11th - Trial of Adolf Eichmann began in Jerusalem

15th - Sabena Flight 548 crashed as it was approaching Brussels on a flight from New York City, killing all 72 people on board, including 18 members of the United States figure skating team and its coaches. It was the first fatal crash of a Boeing 707 passenger jet.

16th - China used its first nuclear reactor

18th - The USS South Dakota (ACR-9) sinks in Powell River, BC

20th - PM John George Diefenbaker holds talks with President Kennedy in Washington, DC