

DETROITER

Forgotten Harvest Continues to Grow through New Opportunities, Technologies and Methods

Written by Julie Mattera April 2009

As Michigan residents face bleak economic times, Forgotten Harvest is helping out Michigan residents, one meal at a time. Forgotten Harvest rescues surplus perishable food that otherwise would be thrown away and delivers that food to 150 different soup kitchens, shelters and pantries throughout Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. It's been over eight years since Executive Director Susan Ellis Goodell joined Forgotten Harvest, and her dedication to its mission has helped propel the organization forward. Forgotten Harvest runs like a business, and Goodell quickly points out the facts and figures relevant to the organization.

“According to the USDA, 96 billion pounds of food get thrown away every year,” said Goodell. “That's one quarter of all the food that's produced in the country. If we could just rescue 5 percent of what gets thrown into landfills and feed our people, there would be no hunger in America, period.”

Goodell joined Forgotten Harvest in 2001. Since then, the organization has gone from rescuing just over a million pounds of food to rescuing over nine and a half million pounds of food in their fiscal year. Goodell says the organization likes to grow by about a million pounds each year, but this year, Forgotten Harvest is working extra hard.

“We are likely to grow by at least two and a half million pounds this year because the need is so off the charts,” said Goodell. “At the same time, we've been growing the amount of food available in the community, we have been growing the number of soup kitchens, shelters and pantries that get that food.”

The common sense implicit in Forgotten Harvest's mission appeals to Goodell's New England upbringing. “It just doesn't make sense to throw away perfectly good food when people down the street can't feed their families,” she said.

Throwing away food has negative environmental and social effects. Food that goes into a landfill in anaerobic conditions creates methane gas, one of the most damaging greenhouse gases on the planet.

Forgotten Harvest rescues “the good stuff” – fresh meat, dairy, fruits and vegetables. Food that keeps people healthy and well nourished, providing the right nutrients and protein needed for humans to develop properly. According to Goodell, brain development does not happen in the absence of protein, and there are more than 219,000 children in metro Detroit that are living in poverty.

“Practically from birth, these children aren't getting enough protein, therefore their brains aren't developing properly,” said Goodell, who has a 6-year-old child. “What does that mean to us as a society that is growing a population that isn't getting the nutrition they need to be healthy productive members of our society. I don't even have words for how disturbing that is.”

A mission worth working for

Goodell's passion for her day-to-day duties and responsibilities draws from her belief in Forgotten Harvest's mission. “Whether you're working in corporate America or for a non-profit, everyone gets tired,” said Goodell. “For me when I'm really at a point when that question enters my head, it's easy at Forgotten Harvest to go to an agency, to get on the truck and be very quickly reminded of why we do what we do everyday.”

Goodell also loves her position's versatility – there is no such thing as a typical day. She works with all facets

of Forgotten Harvest, and she gears her expertise toward the organization's needs. Her duties range from working on projects with staff and volunteers to speaking with potential financial donors whose support could increase the amount of people Forgotten Harvest reaches to recruiting new large food donors.

"I'm a person that needs that kind of variety," said Goodell. "It's interesting everyday. There's always a new challenge, a new way to look at things and a new way to do things."

While Goodell uses a variety of skills in her work, she sees her ability to recognize opportunity as her greatest strength. She focuses most of her energy on thinking about ways Forgotten Harvest can run more efficiently and gain more resources, like food or funds, to continue their mission.

Growing and growing

From the beginning, Forgotten Harvest has grown by utilizing new opportunities, technologies and methods. When Forgotten Harvest was established in 1990, they were rescuing mostly prepared food from caterers and restaurants. In February 2004, they entered into an untapped market. Until that time, it was the policy of grocery chains across the country to dump surplus perishable food – an average daily minimum of 200 pounds of food.

Kroger agreed to work with Forgotten Harvest in February 2004, adding 67 grocers to Harvest's plate. It took some time to ramp up internal capacity in the form of trucks, drivers, diesel and insurance, but Kroger's patience paid off. Forgotten Harvest now rescues about 165 grocers everyday. Targeting grocers in their area such as Kroger, Meijer, Target, Nino Salvaggio's, Plum Market and independent grocery stores, they have one of the largest grocery rescue programs in the country.

"It's a huge source of a variety of different fresh foods for the people we serve. [Getting Kroger] was absolutely huge for us, and now grocery rescue is an incredibly popular method of feeding the hungry throughout the nation," said Goodell. "Thinking back to only February 2004 when it was non-existent, it's amazing."

Goodell constantly searches for new industries and opportunities. About a year and a half ago, Goodell and her staff realized Ontario's position as the "bread basket of Canada." Canada is a huge supplier of produce in the United States, and much of that produce gets shipped through the port of Detroit. For a little over a year and a half, Forgotten Harvest has been working with Canadian hydroponic green houses and Canadian brokerage houses, bringing surplus produce into Detroit to feed the hungry.

"We get a beautiful assortment of hydroponic tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers brought across regularly to feed the people we serve," said Goodell. "That's a pretty untapped market – one to work with hydroponic industry and two to work with Canada."

Working towards a more efficient society

Forgotten Harvest's manpower and funding are its only limitations – there will always be surplus food and people to feed, all Forgotten Harvest needs is the manpower and funding to retrieve and deliver the food. For that reason, the organization constantly recruits volunteers, as well as food and financial donors. Forgotten Harvest's primary volunteer opportunity is their Harvest Helper program which places volunteers on their trucks assisting the driver.

A day spent on one of the trucks is a "life changing experience," said Goodell. In the morning they rescue food from grocers, dairies, farmers, restaurants, catering venues and wholesalers. In the afternoon, the trucks deliver to the shelters, soup kitchens and pantries. Seeing families waiting outside in the cold to receive food, Goodell said, "is not uncommon and is a harsh reality of the overwhelming need we are seeing in our community today."

As Michigan suffers through hard economic times, aid from volunteers and businesses is needed more than ever as the level of hunger increases. With government funding covering one to two percent of their total budget, Forgotten Harvest depends on financial donations to raise the remainder of their annual budget. That being said, the organization is incredibly lean and efficient – every dollar raised provides six meals.

Whether in a food-related field or otherwise, businesses should consider the financial benefits of working with or donating to an organization like Forgotten Harvest. It's a win-win situation. If businesses with surplus food aren't donating their product, they must pay Dumpster and landfill costs. There are significant incentives in place for businesses that donate their surplus food. In addition to writing off their cost, companies that donate food receive a substantial federal tax credit all the while reducing their Dumpster and landfill costs. There are even special incentives for financial donors to Forgotten Harvest and other local hunger relief organizations. Companies, individuals and couples who make a contribution are eligible for the Michigan income tax credit over and above their federal deductions.

In addition to 400 food donors, Forgotten Harvest works closely with many businesses. UPS works with them regularly and helps with the trucking aspect of their organization, providing new technologies and more efficient methods. The organization depends on technology to do their daily work, Goodell emphasizes.

"We just had a company, ERSI, donate software for routing that we'll be implementing in the next few months," said Goodell. "We use handheld computers on every truck. We have GPS tracking on every truck. We monitor idle time which is saving us on our fuels costs, which was an idea of UPS."

A call to businesses

Goodell has seen Forgotten Harvest grow to heights previously unthought-of, but there is still much room for growth. Oftentimes, the agencies that work with Forgotten Harvest run out of food before all of the people in line go through. Goodell hopes that the business community will respond to the call of Forgotten Harvest and organizations like it.

"We are on track to rescue close to 12 million pounds this year from approximately 400 food businesses. There are thousands of food companies in our region and we are focusing our efforts to reach more and more of those companies that have surplus, highly nutritious food to offer, especially meat, produce, dairy and prepared foods, We are willing to go anywhere throughout the 1,967 square miles we serve to pick it up. To any of the businesses that have food operations that read this article, I would ask them to please call us. We have more than enough good homes for that food, and we're reaching out to the business community that handles food on a commercial basis to please, please call us. We have the capacity to come get that food and take it where it's needed most."

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