



“Dust ’em off, tape ’em up and send ’em out; that’s what we do here,” declared Linda Rogers, about the goods that she and the other volunteers were picking through in the recovery room. She should know after almost 18 years of service to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.

A lot has changed in those years since she started helping out one night a week at its former location in West Warwick (it moved to Providence in 2003) but the work is the same.

“It’s still sorting food. That’s what it’s all about,” she said.

That is what it’s all about, and the Food Bank has been providing quality food to Rhode Islanders facing hunger for over 25 years. Hunger has an impact on every single community in the state, affecting some 48,000 households.

Through its network of certified member agencies, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank provides a safety net for families in need

FOOD HEROES
BY DAVID ROCHELEAU
PHOTO BY THAD RUSSELL

THE RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY FOOD BANK

25 Years of Neighbors Helping Neighbors

and distributed \$11 million in donated food in 2007—approximately 8 million pounds. Food insecurity is a growing problem. Rhode Island’s rate of childhood poverty is up to 21 percent, the fastest growing in New England and the third highest in the country among cities with a population of 100,000 or more.

While the Food Bank has been successful in distributing food through a variety of over 300 agencies, including soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, group homes and community action

programs, it has established other innovative programs as well.

The Community Kitchen, for example, is a job-training class for people with few employment skills. Student chefs learn basic kitchen skills to prepare them for jobs in the food service industry. As a part of their training, students cook meals every day for the Kids’ Cafe, which serves healthy meals to children and provides nutrition education as a part of

The staff and volunteers of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank

their after-school activities. Kids' Cafe feeds more than 500 children at 12 sites in Providence and Newport.

But merely having food for everyone isn't enough, according to Andrew Schiff, the executive director. "We're really trying to improve the quality of the food," he says, and the move into the expanded facility has allowed them to do just that.

The Food Bank's new home at 200 Niantic Avenue effectively doubled the size of the West Warwick location. The ability to handle perishable products, such as fresh vegetables, multiplied many times over.

The capacity to store perishable food led to the Community Farm program in 2005, when a network of farms started growing and donating fresh produce items to the Food Bank. A year after that, the Neighborhood Pantry Express began delivering quality local fruit and vegetables to the communities that need it most.

Using a farmers' market approach, hungry people in high-need areas of the state are given access to the most nutritious foods possible. The seven farms around the state bring the concept of community-based resources to fight hunger full-circle.

One primary emphasis of the seven Community Farms is the use of unused or underused land for the purpose of growing valuable fresh foods. One farm in Cumberland connected with the Food Bank was recently saved from development. "They were [going to] put up condos," says Frank Geary of the Historic Metcalf-Franklin Farm. "Three years ago a group got together to buy the 1854 farm house and the 2½ acres. We were successful in adding it to the National Register [of Historic Places]."

"We talk a lot with the Food Bank on what we're going to grow. They give us guidelines and we go with what we feel is easy to grow and harvest," adds Denise Mudge, the volunteer coordinator for the Franklin Farm. They grow "spectacular" tomatoes, eggplant, basil, parsley, cucumbers and yellow and acorn squash, using spring-fed water and no pesticides.

A variety of people come to help out on the farm, from little kids to seniors to people who just want to come after work. The focus is to keep it sustainable by making it convenient for the volunteers.

"We have an open-door policy," says Denise. "We know [volunteers] can't always commit." Every Monday and Thursday, from 5:30 PM to dusk, people can give a half an hour or an hour—whatever they can give. "It's a very friendly thing," Frank added. "We've had such a great group of people...and everybody who takes part in it feels good about it."

One of the great things about the farm program is that it happens in summer, the "forgotten" time of the year. "There's seasonality to giving," says Andrew Schiff. "We tend to get a lot of donations in November and December for the holidays. But summer is the low time for us in terms of our inventory. Food donations are down; cash donations are down. With kids not eating meals in school, for our clients, it can be the worst time."

Even though the 2007 growing season generated over 107,000 pounds of fresh produce—a huge accomplishment—the Summer Food Drive provides essential shelf-stable foods like cereal, pasta, rice and canned soup or beans. Participants in the Summer Food Drive can organize local food drives in their neighborhoods or work places, and drop off donations directly to the Food Bank.

Clearly, there's huge community support for what the Food Bank does every day. "People really identify with how difficult it must be when a family has trouble putting food on the table," says public rela-

tions manager Michael Cerio. "We're flexible with what we're able to do with monetary donations, whether it's a dollar, or five dollars, or five thousand dollars. Everything's tight for everyone but people feel that the little they may be able to give will make a big impact."

"I'm really blown away by the different people who are involved with the Food Bank," adds Schiff. "It's just amazing. From Johnson & Wales to local food pantries and all their volunteers. It takes so many people to make this work. But we really have amazing support throughout the state."

For Linda Rogers and her husband Bob, the Food Bank is a very comfortable place. "The volunteers are wonderful people, and we really enjoy each other. We have made lasting friendships. We've been fortunate in our life, so it's only fair if we can help this way."

She pauses. "Everybody wants to be needed, I think. It's a feeling of, 'I can help. I can do something.'" eR

David Rocheleau is a chef-educator, freelance writer and a culinary arts graduate of Johnson & Wales University. He works for the Feinstein Community Service Center at the University.

Rhode Island Community Food Bank
200 Niantic Ave., Providence • 401-942-6325 • rifoodbank.org

Historic Metcalf-Franklin Farm
Denise Mudge, volunteer coordinator
142 Abbott Run Valley Rd., Cumberland • dmudge11@cox.net



*Staying Healthy
Never Tasted So Good*

ACAIBERRI

Antioxidant Elixir of Life

www.acaiberri.com
acaiberri@cox.net

- Anti-aging, energy-boosting & invigorating!
- Highest available antioxidant value per ounce.
- The most economical price & the best taste.
- Provides support to the immune system.
- Large, 750 ml (25.5 fluid ounce) bottle.

Distributors wanted!
Call: (401) 421-3782

No restrictions on buying or selling!
No membership fees!



nicks on broadway

supporting local growers and producers since 2001

breakfast • lunch • dinner • special events

500 broadway providence rhode island 02909
401.421.0288 www.nicksonbroadway.com