

**THE NEWSDAY INTERVIEW WITH LINDA BREITSTONE `It Makes Sense to Utilize Our Resources'
She was interviewed by Newsday staff writer Stuart Vincent**

Text:

Q: Long Island is one of the nation's wealthiest suburbs. Why do we need an organization like Island Harvest? A: Unbeknownst to most people, there are over 300,000 people from Long Island seeking food assistance. There are over 40,000 homeless on Long Island, and of those homeless, more than 50 percent are children. When people think of people seeking food assistance, it's not always people who are starving. It could be abused and neglected children in shelters. It could be children in Head Start programs. It could be people who are mentally or physically disabled, people who are in domestic violence shelters, AIDS patients, people undergoing drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Right now, all the different types of agencies serving our community are experiencing tremendous cutbacks by the government, and yet the number of people needing help is increasing. So it just makes sense for us to utilize our resources, food that is perfectly good, that is a surplus after a wedding or another event or is getting close to an expiration date but is still usable and good to serve. Right now, a lot of agencies are struggling to stay open, and if we can save them some money on their food budgets, they may last a few more months or a year. Q: Don't government agencies and private donations support most organizations that serve the poor and hungry? A: Government donations used to be a very large part of their budget, but I can't even tell you how many agencies have told us the government just told them they are cutting their allocation by 40 percent. What do you do, tell 20 more patients they can't get counseling any more? The surplus food is being cut back, government allocations of commodities are being cut back, as well as money. Private donations have gone down because there are more people out of work. You look at the merger of Chemical Bank and Chase Manhattan, and Grumman. If you say we've lost 100,000 jobs, we've lost 100,000 people who could make donations to charities. And businesses that in the 1980s were thriving and could make large donations to charity are having to cut back, too. Q: Has the situation improved at all for agencies serving the needy since Island Harvest began? A: It's gotten worse. We've even seen some close. They just couldn't make it. They relied upon private donations and government money and it just dried up. People just don't have as much disposable income and also people are afraid now because they've seen so many of their friends lose their jobs. They want to put their money in the bank rather than give it to charities for emergencies in case something happens. Q: When you began taking food to service agencies, did any of the clients being served surprise you? A: The senior citizens and the children with their mothers. I really didn't expect to see children on soup kitchen lines, but there are whole families now on soup kitchen lines and food pantry lines. I really didn't expect that. The women and the children in domestic violence shelters, they're people just like us who can't go home. They may not be poor in their real life, but they can't access that life because of a husband who is out of control. And the families in transition, the people who have recently lost their jobs, who are used to earning money and all of a sudden they find themselves out of work and

in line for food; those people look dazed. They look like they don't know what happened to them. They look like they don't know why they are there, and that's really disheartening. That's a shocker. It really brings you down to earth. The other thing I never really gave much thought to is how fortunate I am to have my mental health, because people with mental health problems really have trouble getting a job. Frequently, there are no people to help them. Sometimes it's difficult to know how to get through government bureaucracy. Q: Who are the volunteers who make your organization work? A: To me, they're just the best human beings in the world, people who really just want to reach out to their neighbors, people who care. People who realize just how precarious life can be, people who realize we're all in this together. They come from all walks of life, from veterinarians to prosecutors to lawyers to legal secretaries to judges to housewives to students. Also service organizations - the National Council of Jewish Women, Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks. PTAs are big now. We get a lot of PTA service committees who are helping us, and of course friends of volunteers and just people who pick up a copy of Newsday and read about us and give us a call. Q: Why has Island Harvest grown so quickly in terms of sponsors, donors and volunteers? A: I think it makes sense to people not to throw away food. I think people hate the senseless waste of food. I think it's just a win-win situation to pick up surplus food from people who would otherwise throw it away, and deliver it to agencies and people who need it. And it's so simple that it just makes sense to people. Q: What are the biggest concerns of food donors or service agencies when you approach them about donating or receiving food? A: The first concern of food donors is that many of them don't know about New York's Good Samaritan Law, which protects them from liability if anyone should get sick from the food. The primary concerns of recipient agencies are that they want to make sure they're going to get good, wholesome food for their clients. After they realize we do everything by Health Department standards and they realize we're probably more concerned than they are, they start trusting us. We're also very careful where we get food from. We tell the chefs, "When in doubt, throw it out." And we tell volunteers, "If you wouldn't serve it to your family, don't take it." Q: How have you managed to get many of Long Island's largest hotels, restaurants and country clubs to help? A: A lot of it has to do with a wonderful organization called the American Culinary Foundation, and the Long Island chapter, which was founded by - and now he's president of it - John Erickson. It's an organization of premier chefs and sous chefs and cooks on Long Island. They have adopted Island Harvest and they believe in it. Those chefs have just helped to make sure food from their various establishments is donated and they've spread the word to other chefs. And the fact that they support us has also added to our credibility because they're an organization totally dedicated to safe food handling. Q: Are there any parts of Long Island you don't serve? A: We've just recently expanded out into the Hamptons, but there are a lot of areas in between Nassau and the Hamptons that we haven't hit yet. There are little pockets we haven't hit yet. We'd like to spread out more into those areas. Q: Are there any new sources of food you haven't tapped yet? A: The [Hamptons] gleaning project is just unbelievable. That was started by Rivalyn Zweig. We basically glean produce from farms that otherwise would probably end up rotting in the field. One time there were peaches that were blown off the trees. They were absolutely fabulous and we were able to get a group of schoolchildren and service organizations to go and pick it up and deliver it to food pantries. We've just started that and it's been responsible for several tons of perfectly good produce. Families at food pantries can't even believe their eyes when they see fresh vegetables and fruits because they usually don't get that. It's a real godsend. We're hoping we'll be able to take that produce and bring it back into central and western Suffolk and Nassau. Q: Did you have any idea when you first began delivering sandwiches that Island Harvest would grow as large as it has? A: I would have been afraid to start it had I realized it would have grown so big. But not knowing, and progressing slowly, it was easy to do. Had someone told me we would have an organization with almost 400 volunteers and two refrigerated trucks

that goes from the Queens-Nassau line to the Hamptons, I wouldn't have believed it. What really makes it spectacular is just the incredible number of people who are contributing to make it happen. One or two or five people can only do so much, but when you start adding more people and businesses, you realize you can move this mountain. And the amount of caring and love that is on Long Island just never ceases to amaze me.