

NOT-FOR-PROFITS / Harvesting Food From LI Communities Keeps Volunteers on Go

By Jamie Martorana. STAFF WRITER

Text:

LUCILLE RASKIN spends her Tuesday mornings a little bit differently than most people.

The stay-at-home mom, who resides in Oyster Bay Cove, starts her day at the Pine Hollow Country Club in East Norwich, where she picks up a shipment of soup. She then travels to Sutton Place Gourmet in Woodbury to pick up breads and salads, followed by a trip to Burger King for leftover burgers and fries.

Her final stop is an outreach center in Huntington, where she unloads the goodies she's collected from her Range Rover.

Raskin is one of more than 600 volunteers who use their own vehicles and gas to pick up and deliver perishable goods for Island Harvest, an organization that collects surplus food to feed the hungry on Long Island.

"It only takes an hour of my time, but it helps so many people," said Raskin, who has delivered 6,000 pounds of food for Island Harvest during the past two years.

The nonprofit organization was started in 1992 out of the home of founder and president Linda Breitstone.

"At the time, I was a stay-at-home housewife, and my husband came home one day and told me they were throwing away a whole bunch of sandwiches at 7-Eleven because they were a day old," Breitstone said. "I thought, 'What a shame,' and said maybe this is something I could look into."

When she approached the store owner to see why he wasn't donating the food to the needy, he expressed concerns about being held liable if someone got sick from the food. He also was unaware of places where he could donate the excess goods.

With a little research, she discovered a Good Samaritan Law, which protects food donors from liability if anyone should get sick. She then went to the health department to find out the best ways to handle perishable items and started calling around for places near her Rockville Centre home to which she could deliver the goods.

"I never realized that 10 minutes from my house was a soup kitchen and another 10 minutes was a domestic violence shelter," Breitstone said. "I kept finding all these places that needed food, and eventually I was delivering food seven days a week."

What started out as a one-woman show has now sprouted into an organization with more than 600 volunteers, delivering more than 3 million pounds of food a year.

Island Harvest collects food from more than 500 commercial food donors and delivers it at no cost to 350 nonprofit agencies in Nassau and Suffolk, including soup kitchens, homeless shelters, child-care centers, youth organizations and safe houses for abused women and children.

Volunteers are trained on how to transport the food, which is always refrigerated, packed in special FDA-approved food storage containers and monitored according to state health department guidelines.

"We tell the chefs, 'When in doubt, don't give it to us,'" Breitstone said. "If

you wouldn't eat it, then don't give it to poor people."

Over the years, Breitstone said she hasn't had trouble persuading restaurants, caterers and food stores to donate food.

"Most of these places don't like throwing food away," Breitstone said. "They just have to know it's safe to give it away and know where to give it to."

Most of Island Harvest's donors are recruited through word-of-mouth. The American Culinary Federation, Long Island chapter, made up of the Island's top chefs, also has been instrumental in spreading the word.

"We're just helping out our neighbors and the community," said Darlene Cosenza, assistant sous chef with the Long Island Marriott Hotel and Conference Center in Uniondale. "Instead of just throwing the food in the garbage, we thought it would be better to help someone out."

Volunteers usually stop at the Marriott every Monday to pick up food, which can include anything from garlic chicken with horseradish sauce to mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables.

"This weekend we were supposed to have a huge lunch buffet," Cosenza said.

"There weren't as many people as planned. We must have given them enough food for at least 60 people."

Other places, such as the Weeping Willow in Farmingdale, have given up to 800 pounds of food at times.

"There's always some sort of food product left over," said Phil DeMaiolo, executive chef and partner at the Weeping Willow, which serves American eclectic food. "Rather than throw it in the garbage, it can go toward feeding a hungry kid."

The restaurant has donated dishes ranging from chicken scarparella to beef with white beans and tomato.

Richard Bell, vice president of Mineola-based Family and Children's Association, says the children enjoy the diversity of the food.

"I walked in one day when one of the meals were being served and at first I was wondering how we could afford meals like this," Bell said. "They told me it had been donated by Island Harvest. I was happy the kids were able to experience a gourmet meal."

Food donated from Island Harvest helps feed more than 25 of the association's children a week, Bell estimated.

"It's an added help to us because then we could use the money we would have put toward food toward something else the kids need," he said. "Being a nonprofit agency which is constantly facing government cutbacks and wanting to provide healthy and delicious menus, we need Island Harvest."

Island Harvest itself receives no government funding. The space it occupies in Mineola is donated by European American Bank, which also picks up the organization's utilities and telephone costs. Even the agency's three refrigerated trucks and van were provided by private donors.

Other services, including printing, are donated by a variety of graphics firms such as Rockville Centre Minuteman Press. Additional funds are raised through private donations and an annual dinner dance and golf outing.

In the future, the group hopes to attract more corporate support and possibly open a community kitchen where the food Island Harvest delivers can be turned into meals and then distributed to agencies.

The kitchen could be staffed with some of the same people Island Harvest helps, Breitstone said. At a Glance / Island Harvest Name: Island Harvest Address: 199 Second St., Mineola, N.Y., 11501 Phone: 516-294-8528 Fax: 516-747-6843 Founded: 1992 Budget: \$800,000 Employees: 11 Principal Staff: Linda Breitstone, president; Susan Blaeser, director of administration; Penny Goldstine, operations manager. Chairman of the Board: Monsignor Thomas J. Hartman, director of radio and television for TELICARE. Board Members: 18