

Harvest for the Hungry It began on LI with one angry woman, a station wagon and cooler. Today 150 volunteers are gleaning unwanted food from supermarkets, restaurants and catering halls to stock soup kitchens & food pantries.

By Stuart Vincent. STAFF WRITER

Text:

HE SPENT 15 years as executive vice president at Fortunoff's. He still sits on the board of directors. But on a recent morning, 68-year-old Stan Ulick traded in his pinstripes for a sweatshirt and jeans, strapped on a weight-lifting belt and spent an hour slinging cases of orange juice and mozzarella cheese from a loading dock into a waiting van.

"They need a younger man for this," Ulick said with a grin as he wiped the perspiration off his forehead. "But I think it's very satisfying work." Ulick and Bob Schinnagel of Baldwin, a 61-year-old retired BASF executive, were on a food-rescue mission for **Island Harvest**, a 1-year-old nonprofit organization that makes every day Thanksgiving Day for Long Island's hungry.

The 3,100 pounds of juice and cheese the pair were loading at Waldbaum's warehouse in Central Islip were still fresh, but would have been dumped because the expiration date was too close for the food to be shipped to supermarkets. Instead, Ulick and Schinnagel were rescuing it for Long Island's hungry. Their destinations this day were a soup kitchen, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, a shelter for young women and a day-care center.

An hour later, they arrived at their first stop - the Mary Brennan INN in Hempstead, a storefront soup kitchen that is part of the Interfaith Nutrition Network. (The center is named for the mother of John Brennan, a Garden City businessman who paid for most of it.) Jillian Cardasis, the soup kitchen's director, needed only one look at van's contents. "I am so excited about mozzarella cheese."

Within minutes she was leading a procession of people and cartons through the dining room, past long rows of tables occupied each day by the hungry and homeless, downstairs to the freezers. Cardasis flung open a freezer so packed with cakes, salmon, sausages, chickens, fruits and vegetables that there was barely room for the new items.

"We get chicken. We get veal cutlets. We get fish. We get pasta. We get juice and cheese, sour cream, cottage cheese. We got a massive amount of butter. We get fresh fruits and vegetables," said Cardasis, who daily oversees the preparation of 275-300 meals. "I have sausage and peppers up the kazoo!"

All of it came from **Island Harvest** by way of supermarkets, hotels, restaurants, catering halls and the like. So much, said Cardasis, that the soup kitchen hasn't spent a dime on food in four months, saving more than \$10,000 that is now used for other programs such as a well baby clinic. The Mary Brennan INN is more fortunate than most soup kitchens on Long Island, which are still in need of donations to feed a growing number of hungry people.

Modeled after City Harvest in New York, **Island Harvest** sprang from the outrage of a Rockville Centre mother, Linda Breitstone, who saw the owner of a 7-Eleven throwing away sandwiches at the end of the day. Breitstone asked if she could give the food to poor people and soon after began delivering to a local soup kitchen, using her station wagon and a cooler.

That was in September, 1992. Now, **Island Harvest** - the only program of its kind on Long Island - is carried out by more than 150 volunteers who in their first year delivered about 120,000 pounds of food to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, senior programs, shelters for battered wives and people with AIDS from Long Beach to Port Jefferson and Riverhead. The good Samaritans who make up the volunteer corps include housewives, hotel and country club-chefs, retirees, members of the Kiwanis Club of the Nassau County Courthouse and the National Council of Jewish Women.

For most of the volunteers, the hard reality of the homeless and hungry living just miles from their front doors has been an eye-opening experience.

Stan Ulick's life never brought him near a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter, never forced him to face the fact that there were so many hungry people in one of the nation's wealthiest suburbs: "I had no idea. I only live twenty minutes from here," he said as he brought food into the Mary Brennan INN, "and it's another world."

That becomes more apparent during Thanksgiving and the rest of the holiday

season, when the gulf seems to widen between those who have enough to eat and those who don't.

"With all the turkeys lying around and all the people giving [to **Island Harvest**]," Breitstone said, "there's still a lot of people who don't have Thanksgiving at all because there are some people who just don't access the system or are too proud or who just haven't been identified as poverty cases. That makes me very serious about Thanksgiving. Whatever food I'm eating I'm very fortunate to have."

Today, Breitstone spends most of her time administering the Mineola-based program but says that her occasional food runs still bring her the most satisfaction. Anne Wall, **Island Harvest's** associate director, agrees. Wall, who has taken her children along on food runs, says that "it kind of pulls you out of yourself. I think it's good for the kids to see that not everyone's life is as smooth and privileged as ours."

Breitstone and Wall recharged themselves last week with a food run that started at the Long Island Marriott in Uniondale. Their sense of satisfaction was shared by Lenny Brickel, the hotel's executive chef. "I've always wanted to donate my surplus food, but there was always a question of liability," Brickel said. The Marriott had agreed to participate in the program after Breitstone had told Brickel about the state's Good Samaritan law, which protects donors from litigation.

"You have to build in surplus," Brickel said as he watched the women carry off trays of seafood oriental, penne a la vodka, baked potatoes and rotini. "You try to plan exactly but you never can. The worst thing you can do is to run out of food." The Marriott buys \$2 million worth of food a year and prepares 800 to 3,000 meals a day in its restaurants and banquet rooms.

"Obviously it's good publicity for the hotel," Brickel said of the food-rescue program, "and it makes us feel good to do something for people."

As he speaks, pasta and seafood quickly disappear into large blue and red coolers lined with "virgin" plastic bags. Dignity is important to **Island Harvest**; food is never delivered in garbage bags.

"I think people should be given food with some type of presentation where it looks fresh and clean," Breitstone said. "If, God forbid, my husband and child and I had to go to a food kitchen it would be pretty depressing to see doughnuts coming out of a garbage bag."

Breitstone and Wall hop into Wall's blue-and-white Suburban and take the food to Anthony House in Roosevelt, a halfway house for men who are homeless or down on their luck, many of them undergoing drug and alcohol-rehabilitation. The program helps them find jobs and housing.

"It's a big help. I would say that by the end of the year our food costs are cut in half," said program supervisor Patrick Logsdon as one of the residents helped place the food in a large refrigerator. "It's a wonderful thing if you think of how much food has been wasted and how much money we're saving. "

Logsdon shares the food he receives with Bethany House, which, like Anthony House, is run by the St. Vincent de Paul Society but houses women and children. To him, **Island Harvest** is a "blessing" to the volunteers as well as the people they help.

"There's real human contact," Logsdon said. "They just don't drop off the food." The volunteers agree that **Island Harvest** is more than just a food distribution network.

"People say, 'Oh, thank you.' People don't realize that it does more for me," says Marjorie Lamb, who singlehandedly brought **Island Harvest** to Riverhead. "I'm on a high when I'm doing that. I guess the endorphines must go nuts and I think about nothing but helping and you forget all your problems."

A mother and full-time BOCES employee who does other volunteer work in the community, Lamb finds time to deliver to programs such as the Riverhead-Southampton Head Start program, the Riverhead-Southampton Community Center, the First Congregational Church of Riverhead soup kitchen, the Riverhead Senior Nutrition

Center and the Lov em' Homeless Shelter.

She drives to Port Jefferson because that's where Dave Madigan, owner of Noodles restaurant, and Mike Cosell, a Setauket resident involved in construction and real estate management, started the Suffolk branch of **Island Harvest** this year. They began serving Port Jefferson and Mt. Sinai area and now deliver to Bay Shore, Patchogue and North Bellport.

"There's enough food out there that there shouldn't be a single hungry person," said Cosell. "It's just a matter of us getting the food and getting it out there."

Island Harvest received a major boost when European American Bank provided office space and \$75,000, part of which was used to buy a refrigerated van. "At that time . . . none of us realized how many hungry people there are on Long Island," said Bill Thornton, EAB group senior vice president and a Harvest board member. "We jumped on it."

Other companies quickly signed on. United Parcel Service provides refrigerated tractor-trailers when needed for large quantities of food. Waldbaum's, RMD Catering in Hauppauge, BJ's Warehouse, Price Club and Pizza Hut are regular donors, as are the Long Island Marriott in Uniondale and the Garden City Hotel. Chefs at the Muttontown Club and Cherry Valley Country Club prepare food for the program.

Volunteers say the appeal of **Island Harvest** lies in its very simplicity. "There's food that people have that they don't need, and people who need food who don't have it and people like us willing to bring it to them," said Wall.

Domenick Manzo, who, with his wife, Doris, runs a 7-Eleven in Smithtown, said the program helped ease his mind. Whenever he throws away food, he said, "My mind always goes back to 1944 to 1945 when I was on a carrier on the China Sea, and people followed us in boats and picked up the food we threw out."

On a recent afternoon, Manzo gave 52 sandwiches to **Island Harvest** volunteer Sondra Irvine of St. James, who delivered them to the Welcome INN hot meal program at the Greek Orthodox Church in Port Jefferson Station. Irvine, a lawyer, said she was aware of the hunger problem in Philadelphia, where she lived until a year ago, but was surprised to find it on Long Island. "I thought of it as being in cities."

"What so many of these volunteers are discovering," said Linda Breitstone, "is that many of these people aren't strangers. They're our neighbors."