From Food Waste to Feeding Thousands

Senior citizens spending a morning gleaning cabbages from a Florida field.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SOCIETY OF ST. ANDREW

◆ The Wotring family gathers with some of the turnips they helped glean from a Virginia field while a food bank truck waits to be loaded.

◆ A SoSA volunteer shows off some of the beautiful heads of broccoli she has just gleaned from a farmer's field in Georgia.

Two topics have made countless headlines in the news over the last year: the record-setting highs of the Dow Jones Industrial Average – like on January 25 when it crossed 20,000 for the first time ever – and the downward trend of the U.S. unemployment rate, which was at 4.2 percent in September.

But some numbers aren't getting as much press. Particularly 12.3 percent. That's the amount of U.S. households that were food insecure just last year, according to the "Household Food Security in the United States in 2016" report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

That means that in 2016, 15.6 million American households struggled to provide enough food for each person in the household to maintain healthy eating habits. The reasons are many and sometimes multiple, varying from monetary concerns to a shortage of easily accessible grocery stores. The faces of America's hungry do not always look the way you would expect; people experience food insecurity for differing reasons.

At the Society of St. Andrew, staff and a network of nationwide volunteers work to provide fresh fruit and vegetables to America's hungry – at no cost. This charity has a unique approach, with a neighbor-helping-neighbor model that is focused on reducing local food waste and distributing that food to community members in need.

It all starts with the Society of St. Andrew's programs – like The Gleaning Network and the Potato & Produce Project – and the generosity of local farmers, who donate their excess and unmarketable produce, explains Lynette Johnson, executive director of the Society of St. Andrew.

"Local volunteers go into the fields to pick, dig or gather that good food and then take it to local feeding agencies – soup kitchens, shelters and food pantries – where it is often prepared and served or distributed the very same day to people who are struggling to get by, right in the same community or county," she says.

Tens of thousands of people of all ages volunteer with The Gleaning Network each year. Through their efforts, they were able to salvage and distribute more than 16 million pounds of fresh produce in 2016 alone, which was then donated to those in need and to local food pantries and kitchens at no cost. Contributions from the Potato & Produce Project added another 10.6 million pounds to last year's total.

"We've been at this work since 1983, always focused on getting fresh, healthy food from farms to the forks of people in need as quickly as possible," Johnson says. "[The volunteers'] hard work has put more than 2.2 billion servings of fruits and vegetables on the tables of our hungry neighbors, making 'struggling to get by' just a little less difficult."

In 2016, the Society of St. Andrew received thousands of pounds of bell peppers that needed to be prepared for a food bank in Florida. They brought the peppers to an AARP convention, where seniors dropped in to donate their time to help bag the peppers. Most people stayed 15 to 20 minutes, but there was one volunteer who worked all morning.

This particular volunteer approached the Society of St. Andrew's Florida regional director, Barbara Sayles, and asked, "Where could I go to get beautiful peppers like this for myself?"

During their conversation, says Johnson, Sayles "learned that this volunteer had a difficult family situation and was really having a tough time making ends meet. In addition to her financial struggles, she lived in a senior tower and regularly had access only to a corner convenience store for purchasing food."

When Sayles offered the woman a bag of peppers to take home, the volunteer was moved to tears. Another volunteer overheard their conversation and approached the woman to discuss her situation. This interaction eventually led to connecting her with a nearby food pantry that she didn't previously know about.

"What I love about this is a volunteer spending her entire morning bagging healthy food for others with no expectation of return – giving for the benefit of others when she herself didn't always have enough to eat," Johnson says. "That choice is paying a dividend in her life week after week, as she now receives health-sustaining fresh fruits and vegetables from a pantry."

It was a ripple effect of goodwill that all started with the farmers who donated their crop and the volunteers who rolled up their sleeves to glean the produce for those in need.

"This work really demonstrates how one caring person can make a meaningful difference in the lives of others," Johnson says. "And what energizes me further is knowing this isn't a one-time thing. It's a story that plays out in a thousand variations every year – of the connections the Society of St. Andrew is privileged to make."

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