



Helping Put Food on the Table

Willy Elliott-McCrea and Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County strive to solve local hunger problems

By Amber Turpin

Unless you've been living under a rock here in Santa Cruz County, you have certainly heard of the tireless work that Second Harvest Food Bank is doing. You know they are an effective solution to local hunger issues and that they distribute donated food and excess produce through a variety of outlets. You may even be familiar with some of their impressive statistics: 8 million pounds of food distributed per year to more than 56,000 county residents every month. But the thing that most of us can't quite comprehend, despite having knowledge of this stellar local organization, is what it takes to make it all happen. Here is a behind-the-scenes look at a day in the life of the nation's second oldest food bank.

Willy Elliott-McCrea gets up at 4 o'clock every single morning. As director and chief executive officer of Second Harvest, he has a lot to pack into each day. Yet when you meet the good-natured man, there's no trace of stress. He's an early riser because he simply enjoys his mornings, his daybreak walks, his breakfast routine, his life. By the time he arrives at the Second Harvest warehouse buildings in Watsonville at 6:30 a.m., he is wide awake and ready to take on the complexities of running the \$17 million non-profit, which he's been doing since 1988.

The normally bustling office is quiet when Willy gets there. After opening up the shades to greet the sun, the first thing he does is "head over to see what's going on today" on the gigantic, wall-sized whiteboard that serves as a master guide to the two main operations of Second Harvest. The first major leg of the food bank is running 100 of their own programs. This might include the Passion for Produce program that happens at over 30 locations twice a month, including local housing projects. Volunteers are trained to become "nutrition ambassadors" and teach their own communities how to prepare and enjoy healthy food.

"They are really the ones that own and operate the programs," Willy said of the vast number of volunteers that conduct the 600-plus nutrition classes every year.



(Top) Sharing some of his spare summer vacation time volunteering with his mom, Joshua Casillas waits patiently for checkout at the food bank.

(Above) Food bank employee Laura Carlos helps keep the warehouse spotless at the Second Harvest Food Bank.



(Above) Vickie Caballero, a volunteer in the kitchen at Loaves and Fishes food pantry in Watsonville, loads up a beef stew for the noon meal with vegetables from the Food Bank.

The second major leg to the food bank is distributing food to 100 local agencies and nonprofits. At around 6:45 every morning, Willy wanders out to the distribution area to see what is being packed up, he said. These days, many of the agencies can place their orders online, and then come pick up their food once it is ready.

The retail value of what comes in and out of this newly upgraded warehouse space is over \$30 million annually. Most of it is Grade B produce, 40 percent of which comes from local growers and shippers. It ranges from perfectly good fruit that might be a centimeter too small for retail sale to bruised veggies that never qualify for market. Anything that is past its prime, also called "spoil," is taken to the two industrial-sized composters on site. The composters are turned once a week, creating animal feed and compost for local farms. Ana Rasmussen's Mesa Verde Gardens program uses much of the compost created at Second Harvest for the network of peer-to-peer and family-run community gardens and orchards.

Then comes the big job: delivering the goods.

"Eight million pounds of food a year doesn't move itself," Willy said. "The food bank is really about the drivers. None of this is magic."

Willy started out as a driver in 1978, so he knows what a production it is to physically transport food from point A to point B, and everywhere in between. Shortly before 7 a.m., Willy heads into the Produce Box, aka the humongous walk-in refrigerator. This is where the wrapped and labeled bundles of packed orders await pick up from participating agencies, as well as pallets full of produce from



(Above) Food bank volunteer Linda Jennings lends a hand to Janet Krupa of Jacob's Heart in the shopping area of the bank.



(Above) Food Bank volunteer Alejandro Cantolan drops some broccoli into a bag of fresh vegetables on an assembly line at the bank's Watsonville warehouse.



(Above) Willy Elliott-McCrea is director and chief executive officer of Second Harvest Food Bank.

Lakeside Organics, Happy Boy Farms, and the always-popular donations from Kitayama Brothers flower farm. Once in a while Willy also checks out the huge freezer space next door, which houses random cases of pot stickers, ice cream, and frozen turkeys.

By 7 a.m., Willy already has a handle on what is going on throughout the facility. He stops by the receiving room to see what has arrived on the docks (something that didn't exist only four years ago), and then meanders through another large warehouse, stacked floor to ceiling with all the USDA food. That food is sourced with money from Congress, allocated to stock and distribute staples to food banks across the United States. This last room is also the storehouse for "unmarketable" foods donated by grocery stores and manufacturers: the food ranges from expired products or dented cans to restocked and discontinued specialty items.

With all of that under control, Willy takes a short coffee break. Very short. At 7:30 the rest of the staff has arrived, and by 7:45, several volunteers show up to prep for their

various programs and projects.

At 8 a.m., it's show time. Time to open the Community Food Hotline, the highly integral phone line that serves as the main artery for people to find the food program information they need in order to get help. All of the work done behind the scenes is worth the effort when the trucks roll out, the phones start to ring, and people in need are able to get fresh, healthy food. ■

Get Involved

- ▲ **Donate**
 - ▲ **Mail a Check**
Second Harvest Food Bank
800 Ohlone Parkway
Watsonville, CA 95076-7005
 - ▲ **By Telephone**
(831) 722-7110, ext 210.
- ▲ **Volunteer**
 - ▲ Contact Danny
(831) 722-7110, ext. 205