As you will see in this edition of The Inside SCOOP, the 2023 NBC15 Share Your Holidays campaign theme is NOURISH • THRIVE • TRANSFORM. In our work at Second Harvest Foodbank, we see the connections between the three. Without nourishment, our community can’t thrive. And when our community thrives, transformation is possible.

What might NOURISH • THRIVE • TRANSFORM mean as we look to the future?

Nourishment for a family may mean the confidence that meals consistently include fresh produce, milk, or eggs through our Farm to Foodbank Initiative. Thriving can mean an ability to focus in school or work, and having the energy to fully participate in school sports or community activities. Transformation can include fewer nutrition-related health disparities based solely on where you live, or the resources needed to support current and future generations in their aspirations.

For Second Harvest Foodbank, “nourish” has increasingly become part of our work. We have shifted our focus towards nutrition security, not just food security. It is not simply about moving food, it is about the types of food we source and share to support our neighbors. It is about choice and dignity, and cultural responsiveness.

Our network of partners and programs “thrive” when we look beyond what is easy, cheap, and abundant, and collaborate with neighbors, partners, and communities to move towards what is needed, useful, and most effective. Communities “thrive” when we work towards equitable food distribution solutions that are co-created with members of the communities we seek to support. Nutrition Security and Food Equity are big goals – but they are not the complete answer.

For “transformation” to be possible, we must take steps to address the underlying causes of food insecurity. As a food bank, we must focus on the root causes of hunger, which include access to affordable housing, healthcare, and a household income that provides financial stability over time.

The road ahead will not be easy, but if we work together to make sure everyone has the support they need to thrive, the transformation is not impossible. Thank you for being on this journey with us!

Thank you!

Michelle Orge
President/CEO
Sometimes overcoming the challenges of life is a state of mind. You simply choose to change your circumstances. That’s what Barry Mahlun – a.k.a. “Mr. Barry” in his neighborhood – did over 20 years ago and has never looked back.

“My childhood was hell,” Barry said. “My family were all junkies, drug dealers, or alcoholics. My brother died of a heroin overdose. My mom was the most toxic person you will ever meet. She used and abused everybody. I was never safe as a child.”

That “toxic” environment included significant levels of food insecurity. Barry shares, “I know what three or four days without food feels like. I know what hunger is. It is horrible as a child. There’s nothing worse as a kid than not having any food.”

One day, in his early twenties, Barry packed what little he had and left. “I left the house and never came back. I refused to do all that stuff because it’s not me.”

His journey led Barry to getting his Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) license. While working as a CNA his life would take another turn. He met his wife, Patti (also a CNA). Together, along with daughters Josie and Olivia, they’ve built a life in Sun Prairie.

All along, Barry and Patti had agreed that when they had children, he would be a stay-at-home dad. But on Patti’s CNA salary, money was tight, so they turned to their local food pantry for assistance. “We’ve never made a whole lot of money, especially during COVID. Knowing that the pantry is there and that the kids won’t starve, that peace of mind is priceless.”

Today, Barry has turned his love of taking care of his kids and helping others into a job…three jobs, actually. In addition to being a Playground Helper and the “Walking School Bus” (yes, it’s exactly what it sounds like) for Westside Elementary School in Sun Prairie, he is also a Neighborhood Navigator for the City of Sun Prairie in his low-income neighborhood.
FROM SOFTWARE DESIGNER TO RESOURCE PROVIDER

This is a story of how corporate downsizing led to a second career...

For 23 years, Stacy Darga worked in corporate America designing software for banks and insurance companies. As these things go, her Wisconsin-based company was bought by a company in Florida. While most of her colleagues were let go, a handful, including her, were kept and able to work from home. A desire to seek out human connection led her to volunteer at her children’s elementary school over the lunch hour. Six months later, when her company asked her to move to Florida, that lunchtime volunteer gig turned into a full-time second career.

As it turned out, the school – Westside Elementary in Sun Prairie – needed a Community School Site Coordinator. A Community School has significant achievement gaps and higher rates of its students being eligible for the free and reduced-price meal program. As the Site Coordinator, Stacy’s job is to identify what families need and then source the solutions. Those solutions have ranged from creating a clothing closet, acquiring school supplies, starting an after-school academic program, and even bringing in dentists to provide free dental care.

“One family I got to know while we had our mobile pantry distribution. There was a mom with two little ones at home and one here (Westside). She had some vehicle issues, so I started delivering food boxes to her. I helped drive her to an interview for a CNA position that she ultimately got. They were able to move out of Section 8 housing and into a duplex. She’s a real success story. I hear they are doing well, and she’s asked about volunteering.”

When asked how it makes her feel to help the families in her school, she said emphatically, “Amazing!” Then, she continued, “These are my kids and my families. I just really want them to have what they need.”

“Kids need food in their bellies to learn...they just do. They can’t come to us hungry, or that’s what they will concentrate on.”

With the help of Second Harvest and the local food pantry in Sun Prairie, Sunshine Place, Stacy led the school’s efforts to provide food resources to its families. From organizing mobile pantry food distributions during the height of COVID to opening a small market (formerly referred to as a pantry) in the school, food was a priority for Stacy and the whole Sun Prairie School District.

“We never had a food pantry until the pandemic,” said Stacy. “Everyone was turning to the schools. We become the hub of the neighborhood. None of this would be here without Second Harvest.”

Asked about examples of families she’s helped, Stacy relayed the following:

“When I got to know a mom with two little ones at home and one here (Westside). She had some vehicle issues, so I started delivering food boxes to her. I helped drive her to an interview for a CNA position that she ultimately got. They were able to move out of Section 8 housing and into a duplex. She’s a real success story. I hear they are doing well, and she’s asked about volunteering.”

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Second Harvest’s HungerCare Wellness Program is intended to bridge the gap between healthcare and access to nutritious food. Through collaborations with community and clinical healthcare partners, program participants receive approximately 30 pounds of nutrient-dense food, recipe cards, and wellness tips each month. The program aims to positively support patients with chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease.

But, for some of our rural healthcare providers, the HungerCare Wellness Program provides much more than support for their patients. It’s improving relationships and building trust in the community.

Gundersen St. Joseph’s Hospital (St. Joe’s) in Hillsboro is a perfect example of the connections the HungerCare Wellness Program is forming. According to Brooke Mikla – Community Wellness Coordinator, and Dan Howard – Director of Marketing and Community Relations with St. Joe’s, HungerCare has provided some “eye-opening” experiences.

When St. Joe’s first implemented the HungerCare Program in their community, the pre-packed food boxes were delivered to two area food pantries for their 36 program participants to pick up. But, picking up the HungerCare boxes wasn’t always possible or convenient for program participants.

Brooke shared a story about one of their participants. “The first day, it was pouring rain, and a 90-some-year-old lady named Maryanne was in her wheelchair with her umbrella, getting wheeled down the street holding all this food from the HungerCare program and the food pantry. Bags of food were piled up around the HungerCare box, and she was having a difficult time holding the food and the umbrella at the same time.”

Dan chimed in, “I looked at Maryanne and said to myself, really? There’s nobody who can help her? I wasn’t going to let that happen again.”

The following month, Brooke and Dan piled into a small van to deliver HungerCare boxes to 15 of its participants. According to Dan, “There’s been a lot of benefits for everyone involved in this program. For the people receiving food, they don’t have to go to the food pantry, and they get it delivered. For us, we have so much more knowledge of what people are facing. You think you know poverty. Until you’ve actually seen it with your own eyes, you have no idea. It’s informed the other work we do outside of the HungerCare program. It’s given me an appreciation for how we can have a really big impact on someone’s life.”

For Brooke, the program has been about more than food, “We’re also a connection to the community. It’s such a feel-good thing. I’m so thankful for this program. We’re truly making a difference.”

Regarding St. Joe’s relationship with Second Harvest, Dan shared, “It’s an excellent partnership! I’ve realized that if it’s related to food, I need to call you guys. If someone’s hungry, I know who I can call...it’s Second Harvest.” Brooke added, “You are like our angels. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”