

From F.O.O.D. Crops to Ag Against Hunger

20 years of providing healthy, nutritious produce to those in need

BY LINDSAY COATE, AG AGAINST HUNGER

Inspiration to help others can come from a variety of sources. Twenty-one years ago, in a poverty stricken area of Dallas, TX, a bed ridden, diabetic woman unknowingly inspired an idea that would affect hungry people in need throughout the Central Coast of California.

In 1989, Tim Driscoll, then a berry grower, was participating in The Ag Leadership Program. That day, the program was in a destitute area of Dallas, handing out brown bags of groceries to hungry senior citizens. Driscoll met the then 74-year-old Kelly Broussard in the worst of conditions. And yet, with all that life handed her, she still had a smile on her face. He realized that the smallest things make people happy, and a minimal effort by some can make life ten times better for others. The question that grew out of that fateful day was, how can

hungry people receive fresh fruits and vegetables in addition to the other items that food assistance programs supply?

In 1989, Tim Driscoll knew that about 20 percent of produce grown went to waste and was dumped for various reasons, such as slight damage in shipping, or market declines. Still, the produce was edible.

The Beginning of F.O.O.D Crops

While Driscoll was helping to feed the needy in Dallas, he never dreamed that people could be affected by hunger in the produce-rich environment of the Central Coast of California, a place he called home. Astonishingly, people who were at risk of hunger on the Central Coast were not just homeless, but also, the working poor and



middle class, with day-to-day expenses that meant having to choose between paying rent or buying food. As someone working in the industry, Driscoll knew that about 20 percent of produce grown went to waste and was dumped for various reasons, such as slight damage in shipping, or market declines. Still, the produce was edible. He needed a way to stop surplus produce from going to waste, and help feed people in need.

In 1990, just one year later, with the help of a \$23,000 grant from the Harden Foundation, Tim Driscoll, Willy Elliott-McCrea of Second Harvest Food Bank in Santa Cruz, and Jess Brown of the Santa Cruz Farm Bureau started a program called F.O.O.D. Crops (Food Organizations Organizing and Distributing Crops), a division of the Second Harvest Food Bank. The program was simple: growers and shippers would contact F.O.O.D. Crops when they had surplus produce; and F.O.O.D. Crops would pick up the produce, and store it to be distributed to food banks in the Tri-County area to help feed the hungry. The goal of the organization that year was to have 250,000 pounds of produce distributed from growers to food banks. Imagine their surprise when over 400,000 pounds of produce was donated that first year.

F.O.O.D. Crops Becomes Ag Against Hunger

F.O.O.D Crops saw many changes over the first couple of years, including new per-



Volunteers gleaning for Ag Against Hunger. Photo by: Lindsay Coate



With a \$25,000 gift from the Rotary Club of Salinas, Ag Against Hunger purchased this 50-foot trailer that can carry 26 pallets of fresh produce to food banks. *Photo by: Lindsay Coate*

sonnel, new equipment, more donors, and additional food bank relationships. F.O.O.D. Crops eventually became its own charitable organization, separate from Second Harvest Food Bank. In 1994, F.O.O.D. Crops began their largest fundraising event—the Ag Woman’s Luncheon—which celebrated its seventeenth year in 2010. This annual luncheon is a way to honor one woman who has made an impact in Central Coast agriculture. The following year, the organization purchased its very first flatbed produce truck, which is still in use today. Four years later, the first refrigerated trailer was purchased. Those trucks enabled F.O.O.D. Crops to exponentially increase the amount of produce donated to help feed more hungry people across California.

Over the last ten years, the organization grew by leaps and bounds. The first big leap was when F.O.O.D. Crops changed its name to Ag Against Hunger, to better reflect the long standing mission, “to alleviate hunger by providing the necessary link between the agricultural community and food assistance organizations.” More growth occurred when Ag Against Hunger started a winter program that involved sending a truck to the Imperial Valley and Yuma, Arizona to bring produce to Central Coast food banks during months when no produce was being grown locally. In 2004, Ag Against Hunger reached its largest milestone with more than 100 million pounds of produce donated

and distributed to food banks over a fourteen year period.

A program that began in 2009—trading with other food assistance programs in California and Arizona to diversify the produce provided to food banks—will help Ag Against Hunger reach its 200 million pound milestone even faster.

Ag Against Hunger Today

Today, more than 168 million pounds of produce has been donated to Ag Against Hunger to help feed the hungry. The program works much the same way it did 20 years ago, just on a much larger scale. Ag Against Hunger still collects fresh, surplus produce from growers and shippers, and consolidates the surplus produce at their cooler. The produce is picked up by food banks that make it available to nonprofit agencies, such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens, women’s and children’s shelters, and low-income seniors’ centers. The difference now is much more produce is coming into the organization, allowing many more food assistance programs in California and beyond to receive fresh produce to give to people in need. Fresh fruits and vegetables enrich the lives of people who are at risk of hunger.

Hunger is never going away, and it remains a huge problem in California. According to California Food Policy Advocates, there are 4,781,201 Californians who live in poverty. Over 87,000 of those people live in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties alone (Reference: California Food Policy Advocates Website). Research shows that the people with the fewest resources and lowest incomes are those who are at greatest risk for obesity.

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Ag Against Hunger will continue to grow, as the need to feed the hungry will inevitably continue to grow as well. Although Ag Against Hunger is located on the Central Coast, hungry people are now being reached as far as Arizona, Utah and Colorado. Founder and former Chairman of the Board, Tim Driscoll, hopes that one day there will be a coalition of other Ag Against Hunger organizations to work together on a national level. When asked where he would like to see Ag Against Hunger in the future, he responded, “Ordered the cargo plane yet?” Not yet Tim, but maybe someday soon. **CG**

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