

Food Abundance from Food Waste by Ilonka Wloch

NOVATO, CA - Every week they provide food for as many as 1,500 households in Marin County (CA). They don't charge for the food. Nor do they get paid themselves. Who are these people and why do they do this?

They are two community elders, Ruth Schwartz and her husband Curt Kinkead, supported by a team of about 100 volunteers. They do it because Curt "gets fed by the joy he sees in the people who come to collect the food he delivers." Ruth adds, "If we [Ruth and Curt] do something together where we face out into the world and make a contribution, that is a key piece of having our relationship thrive."

Respecting Our Elders started in 2005 when Curt and Ruth, residents of a subsidized housing development, noticed that some of their neighbors weren't getting enough to eat. The couple decided to do something about that. One thing led to another and in no time a thriving organization spun into existence that picks up and delivers food seven days a week, several times a day.

Usually, the first step is to approach a foods market, a café, or a catering business offering to pick up their excess, dated food. The foods vary from from nori rolls and rib eye steaks, to fresh produce, choice breads and gourmet salads. Once a relationship is established, volunteers make regular pick ups, and deliver the goods within less than an hour, mostly to low-income senior complexes in the county.

Food recipients set up and clean up the delivery area. There are no volunteers rationing the goods; the food is shared amongst all in a spirit of honesty and cooperation. Respecting Our Elders is building community by bringing individuals together. "So many seniors have a tendency to isolate," says Ruth. With this program, there is no separation between the recipients and volunteers. The volunteer drivers and helpers are also recipients. And all the food recipients at the various locations are co-responsible for making sure that the distribution process goes well.

Additionally, with the Saturday Morning Bag Program, volunteers put together and deliver a bag of food, on a weekly basis, to anyone in need in the county. The couple consistently hears stories about how 'recipients are able to make the rent check more easily each month, or do something special out with friends' thanks to the free food received. "What we are finding," Ruth explains, "is that people are moving from living in scarcity and survival to abundance and prosperity, where prosperity is where you are so filled up that you have enough to pass on and take care of others."

Action suggestion:

Contact Ruth and Curt to express your warm appreciation and/or offer assistance. A few of the major food stores involved have recently withdrawn their participation.