

Daily Bread: A Simple Idea That's Feeding The Hungry by Audrey Lin

Simplicity can be disarming.

That's what Carolyn North discovered.

It started with an impulse to save the leftover Thanksgiving turkey her neighbor had discarded as trash. Thirty years later, she and a rotating team of friends-turned-volunteers have been quietly recovering surplus food and delivering it to free food shelters and pantries across the San Francisco Bay Area.

At the surface, it's a simple labor-of-love initiative called Daily Bread. Last year, its 90 local volunteers delivered 32 tons of food with little overhead and virtually no budget. For volunteers, it's a straightforward weekly routine that takes less than an hour to complete. For food donors, it's a constructive, cost-effective way to dispose of excess food. For food shelters and their patrons, it's dinner.

Yet the roots of Daily Bread stretch much broader than that. At a deeper level, it's an excuse to connect— a way of balancing our planet's wholesome offerings through the rediscovery of community. The opportunity to share food with strangers becomes a space to tap into our fundamental interconnectedness.

In this heartwarming conversation moderated by Amit Dunganani, Carolyn North and two veteran volunteer coordinators, Patrice Ignelzi and Chris Hall, disarm us with their full-of-heart stories, unassuming conviction, and visionary simplicity of not wasting food.

Amit: Where did the vision for Daily Bread come from? What were some of the key drivers to get the organization started?

Carolyn: About 30 years ago, right after Thanksgiving, I stopped by a neighbor's house. There was the turkey carcass sitting right there on the table, with about a pound or two of meat on it. She looked at it and said, "I am sick of this thing."

Then she picked it up and threw it into the garbage. I almost reached out to catch it, but I didn't. After that, I went home and tried to figure out with my husband, if every house had a turkey that had another, say, two pounds of meat on it, and if everybody threw it into their garbage, how much meat would that equal? How much meat would be wasted in my own neighborhood? The number was astronomical. Then we figured it out for the city, and the number was even more astronomical.

I thought, "This is ridiculous. We should not be wasting this. So what is an alternative?" Living in an urban area, some of us have more than we need and others of us have considerably less than we need. How do we balance or even that out?"

It seemed like a no-brainer. I figured there must be other people like me who would be willing to take an hour out of their week to bring this surplus food to a free food program. I asked some of my friends, and everybody said of course they'd be willing to do that. One of them was a reporter and said, "Let's put something in the paper." Which we did, saying, "If anybody's interested, please call this number." My phone was ringing off the hook for the next week. So we invited everyone over to my house. We had a party, and we literally started the organization two days later.

What happened at the party was that everyone was enthusiastic and relieved, even, to have something to do. Because everyone feels awful—in the face of hunger, in the world, but especially in their own community. So this person had a friend who worked for that bakery, and that person had a friend who worked in a restaurant. So already, in the first week, we already had about six runs that we could make. I contacted one particular food kitchen, everyone volunteered to be the runner, and we just started.

All we are doing now, really, is what we were doing then. It required no big administration. No big fundraising. No trucks. No refrigerators. It's just people going to the restaurant or bakery, piling the food in their car, and driving it right over to a food kitchen. That's the whole, big complicated—or uncomplicated—deal. Now it's 30 years later, and we're still doing it.

Amit: Wow. Do you think some of the organization's success and sustainability has been because that model is so simple in many ways?

Carolyn: I'm sure of it. Because the idea was that everybody's got time to do one small thing. Most of us don't have time to take on a whole nonprofit venture. But just about everybody—on their way to work, or on their way to delivering the children to school—can stop by a restaurant, grab the food, and drop it off on the way. I tried to coordinate where people lived, where they worked, and the food business and food shelter, so that it was all in the same part of town. To make it very easy. The whole thing in most cases took well under an hour. Everybody felt good about it.

Amit: What challenges did you encounter when approaching businesses? What were some of the hesitations that they had?

First, I tried soliciting food businesses and realized that didn't work. They hear something new and unknown and the immediate reaction is, "No, I don't want to bother with that." The way we ended up working was that I put something in a newspaper and gave an interview or two. And so the word got out. When the word got out, there were a couple of businesses in town that saw it and thought, "Yeah, we can do that." Plus, it saved them the garbage fee— all this food would've been thrown out, so it would've become garbage. In that first month, we had another six to a dozen bakeries, groceries, and food businesses that wanted to participate.

Another challenge is there's also the worry about liability. We had to do some legal research and found out there was a Good Samaritan Law, and there's now an actual law in the books that says people helping to feed other people are not liable if something goes wrong at the other end. Then, it was suggested to me that rather than try and get full legal status, to just stay within the rules—to find out what the local health regulations were, and to stay in them rather than seeking legal approval. And that was easy to do.

Amit: In the guide that you give other organizations, I read that the work of Daily Bread is not to be interpreted as charity. What do you mean by that?

Well, my feeling is that we are all one organism. All beings and all life and all existence are connected. In an organism, there's this constant interplay of contraction and expansion—of sending and receiving. And we are just doing that. The notion that I am doing you a great favor out of the “goodness of my heart” is really not very good for me. And it's simply not true. I think what we're doing is natural. We live in a culture where we are told to compete with one another. We're told that if I win, you lose. On the basic, physical level of reality, it's not true that we are separate. And it's not true that we are being virtuous in giving what we can to each other. It's a reciprocal blessing.

Amit: How have others reacted to that idea, that philosophy? Because I think the dominant paradigm says, “Oh, I've donated money or time or XYZ to this charity. I'm helping.”

Carolyn: I haven't had many negative reactions. I don't have this conversation that often—it doesn't really come up. We're all learning. And there are different levels of understanding how the world works. I guess I haven't had many reactions because I've spoken those words hardly ever before.

Amit: How has this work impacted your own personal journey?

Carolyn: In my work as a healer, what you do in an individual body when you're working with somebody is you try to balance the flow of energy in their own bodies. So what I wanted to do was to do that on the level of community. Because we're so out of balance. That is our illness. So in this small way—in this basic, experiential way—Daily Bread was an opportunity to help people share on the ground. To do the actual act of going and picking up surplus food, bringing it to a food kitchen nearby, and feeding people with it. So it was physical. Do you understand the difference between it being an idea, and just actually walking the talk? That physical act sharing became the teacher.

Amit: That's beautiful. I feel privileged to not only get to hear from you, the founder of Daily Bread, but to hear from people who get to volunteer. They always say, “The proof is in the pudding,” so I thought it'd be nice to skip to dessert for a bit. Patrice, Chris, welcome to the call. Patrice, can you tell us about how you came across to Daily Bread? And maybe how you came into becoming its coordinator?

Patrice: I came to Daily Bread when I was pretty established in my life and was really ready—and felt compelled—to do something. To give back to the community that had so nurtured me. And I happened to be looking—I had this in my mind. And one day, I answered a very small notice in the East Bay Express asking for help distributing food. Just one hour a week.

I thought, “Even though I have small kids and a business and everything, I can do that.” So I called the director and she assigned me a run where I could deliver milk from a local market here called Berkeley Bowl, which is a partner in our Meals for Kids program, and bring it to a homeless shelter. So I thought, “Well, I'll start doing this and see how it goes.” And one day I woke up and realized I had been doing it for over 10 years.

During that time, I had gotten more interested in the workings of Daily Bread. I had gotten to be friends with some of the other people involved, some of the coordinators of it then. When their involvement had sort of taken its course, I was asked to take over the reins of that. And so I did. I actually went back just out of curiosity to see, gee, how long have I been doing this? And it turns out I've been the coordinator for over 10 years. It just fit my lifestyle.

For me, just delivering food, which I've done now for over 20 years, is just immediately gratifying. Just looking at the faces of people. Or a simple heartfelt "thank you". That's way more satisfying than any kind of payment. I couldn't even come up with a dollar amount that would feel as good as that "Thank you," and knowing that we're making a difference in somebody's life that day. I feel that I get more out of it probably than even they do.

And our force of volunteers is now about 90 people. It's grown over the years, through word of mouth. One friend talks to another. My husband does a run every week. My son has done runs. He's now 21 and he grew up with Daily Bread as being something that we did every week. He and a lot of my friends said, "Yeah, I could do that."

Amit How many different businesses and shelters do you guys coordinate and work with?

Patrice: We take food to about 70 places each week. It's about 35 organizations, but some of them we go to multiple times a week. We pick up food from about 3 dozen food businesses—bakeries, shops with prepared food, sometimes caterers, farmers markets, even national chains like Chipotle—we're now in this system of national organizations who have joined into this idea that they don't want their food to be wasted. So every time they start a new chain, they call up an organization like Daily Bread to take their excess food on a daily basis. And it's local grocers also—we even pick up from a tofu-maker on a daily basis.

Amit: How do you keep the flow of new donors coming in? I imagine some of the food businesses from 30 years ago are not around today, and there are also new businesses popping up.

Patrice: People, often our own volunteers, approach me and say, "Do you think we can go to such-and-such place in my neighborhood? I see they have lovely salads and they throw them out every night."

Once, one volunteer, who was picking up milk from a food store, said, "My kids go to school with kids of the owner of Semifreddi's Bakery. Do you think I should call them up and see if they'd be open to giving us their surplus bread?"

We now pick up bread every week, and I think that amounts to somewhere on the order of 13 tons of bread a year. And all together, last year, we delivered about 32 tons of food. That's just our local volunteers.

Amit: Chris, how has your experience with Daily Bread been? Can you share about your experiences with Farmers' Markets?

Chris: One week, I was collecting food down at the Farmers' Market. Originally, I've known a few people that work in the food industry. One of them caters. And I said something to him that day, and he said, "Oh, we just did this Bar Mitzvah and there's all this extra food."

So I said, “Oh, well I’ll come by and get it.”

We got it down to the shelter, and people were delighted of course to get all this wonderful hummus, and baked salmon, and all kinds of really delicious and nutritious food.

People want to help each other. They don’t always have a safe structure or format to do it. And Daily Bread is that opportunity. So volunteers can mold it to fit their style of involvement. And I think that’s what makes it so successful. Daily Bread a living thing. It’s not a rigid model. So someone can come up to us and say, “I know this guy, and I know this guy.” No money changes hands—it’s just food and goodwill.

Amit: Is that what’s attracted you so much to the organization, and kept you there as a volunteer for 8 years, as opposed to volunteering elsewhere?

Chris: Absolutely. You know, we all get solicitations for charity, to write a check for this and that. And we try to do what we can, but we always wonder, where does the money actually go? How much of it goes to the costs of administration or other overhead expense?

This is the real deal. Everything that we get to do goes directly to benefit somebody. That feeling just resonates with people. It’s transformative with the volunteers. For me it is, I know. I love this quote from Horace Mann—he said, “Doing nothing for others is the undoing of ourselves.”

Every time we do this, we get a chance to reach out and connect to our fellow human beings. What I enjoy so much about it, besides just the food, is that we get to let people know that we care about them. And that is just terrific. When you go to the shelters and deliver food, and people come out quickly to help you unload your van or whatever you brought your stuff in—you’re helping them set their table. It’s pretty cool.

Amit: Wow, Chris, so many beautiful nuggets and gems in there.

Chris: We’ve all gone along a street somewhere and perhaps smiled at a stranger. And they smile back. And you go, “Oh my goodness!” [laughs] Everyone out there wants to connect with each other.

Amit: Can you share a story about how one of the farmers or business or people at the shelters has been impacted by what you’re doing?

Chris: We have people every Sunday at the Farmer’s Market that put together boxes of materials that they want to donate. One of our vendors at that market sells cut flowers. One day, I told her about what we do. And as we’re taking the food donations, she says, “Well I’ve got these flowers here, you should take some of these.”

So I took those with the food along to the shelter. And I gave them to the people sitting outside who were waiting for a meeting or the dinner to get set up.

It was just unbelievable. I had 2 women who I had given these surplus flowers to. One of

them started to cry.

She said, “Nobody’s ever given me flowers before.”

How much better does it get than that? Just having that connection with people is pretty transformative.

Amit: Are there things that Daily Bread does that connect the donors with the recipients of the food?

Patrice: Oh, absolutely. All the time. In fact, a number of people who work in the food businesses or at the recipient food agencies have become our volunteers, and so they get to be part of it. A lot of the recipients really want to know where the food comes from. They write notes on a daily basis thanking the donors.

One of the houses is called Clausen House. It’s a home for developmentally disabled adults. Each year, they put on a lunch made of the food that’s delivered from this organic garden in Oakland. And they invite the people who grow the food to this lunch. So a number of people really do want to make that connection.

The balance in Daily Bread is what we call a “win-win-win situation”. The donors win because they know their food is going someplace other than in the landfill—that it’s actually being used. The recipients clearly win because they’re getting this food that they didn’t have access to before. And it’s a win for the volunteers, who bring the food from point A to point B. All along the way, it sort of gets around this idea of “charity”. It goes beyond charity—it’s a win for all involved.

Amit: Patrice and Chris, thank you so much for sharing your perspectives and experience with us. Carolyn, I’d love to dive in to some of the other aspects of your life and the philosophy behind it. I know that Daily Bread is one of the many things you do. Can you share about some of those other things as well?

Carolyn: Everything that I do, it looks like an awful lot on the page, but it’s actually all the same thing. It has to do with balancing the energies of body, mind, and spirit and community and the world and the cosmos in every way that I can. Because I think that’s what’s real.

But I’m also very aware of what’s happening in the world in terms of major changes—what Joanna Macy calls “The Great Turning”. We are in transition to the next level of evolution—consciousness, evolution, I don’t know what words to use for it. That means many of the old ways are breaking up. So we’re in this destructive phase that is so terrifying. All the work I do in the world is an attempt to ease that passage. So the way I try to do that is by taking positive steps in every way I can. Counteracting the fear that we are all feeling with positive action with enjoyment and with pleasure and with change.

One of the things that I have loved over the years with doing Daily Bread is that it’s very out there, in the world’s eye. So it attracts attention, and it also attracts generosity, partly because it itself is an act of generosity. Those who resonate with its generosity become generous in turn.

Over the years, we’ve gotten offered some of the most amazing things. Like land, for

example, to do gardens and farms. We've had a number of farms over the years, some in town and some out in the country. In fact, we had one of the first permaculture farms when permaculture was a word that most people hadn't heard yet. We had one up north of here in Mendocino County, a gorgeous one acre farm that provided food for the local people.

Amit: I know there's another iteration of Daily Bread that you're working on that has to do with farms and youth and elderly. Can you share that vision?

Carolyn: Well, it's still in the vision phase, but what I'm really wanting to do now is a large, urban food-producing and residential community in the area. And of course land is very expensive here, but we have outlying suburbs. One of them is called El Sobrante. In El Sobrante, there's a group of wonderful people who call themselves Wild & Radish. They've managed to buy 10 acres of open land that they're turning into a permaculture food forest and an eco-village. And adjoining them—or not really adjacent physically, but in the same town, what I'd like to do is buy a house. And turn it immediately into the nonprofit, Daily Bread. In this house, I'm hoping that there'd be about six people living there. Two or three of them would be elders. And two or three of them would be younger folks. And the elders, who tend to have more money in the bank than young people do, would actually pay all the bills. They'd buy it and be willing to turn it into a nonprofit. And the young people would do all the work—they'd do the gardening, the maintenance, and the assistance of these elders as they got older.

And then, the dream goes a little farther. There's a 2-acre parcel down the road from this particular house I'm looking at, which is also for sale. It's just land without a building on it, and that's where the farm can be, if this all can work. Also the elders buying the land, there's so many people of the younger generation who really want to cultivate land and grow food, and do it locally. Hopefully, we'll find the perfect few farmers who would want to do that. And then we would also build on the land.

It's a far-flung dream. But it would all be done under the egis of Daily Bread, and it would, again, sort of local, self-sustaining, growing, and eating of local food.

Amit: That's beautiful. I wanted to touch on this idea of money. How do you see the way the economy is set up—the way financial systems are set up—relating to your vision of Daily Bread and perhaps this new farm system?

Carolyn: Well, I look at the economy, and I see the discrepancy between those who have too much, basically, and those who have too little. And then I look at what the basis of it is, which is growth, endless growth, which the natural world doesn't do. That would destroy the planet in no time at all.

In a for-profit system, what I see as something that is basically dysfunctional, inhumane, and philosophically incorrect, because it doesn't match the way the world is put together. So what it results in—and we can all see it—is unhappiness, greed, and a kind of irrelevance in the sorts of things that are produced for you. Advertising, for example, creates desires for things that are sort of unnatural, from my point of view. Then, money is made from them and you have this waste of things going to the landfill, which is destroying the land and the oceans. None of this is intelligent in terms of having a sustainable world.

So I look at it and I say, "I won't play the game."

And, you know, I can get away with it, partly because my husband is a professor and he supports our family. However, when I did start Daily Bread, the joke is, even though I had all these feelings at that time, the reality was I didn't know how to do an organization with money. I didn't know how to balance a checkbook or get funding or deal with banks. I just wanted to avoid it. So my real reason was just to make it easier for myself, rather than any high-flung philosophy.

But now, I'm going to do the high philosophy thing. I really want to use as little US dollars as we can get away with. And to do most things in other ways. This mutual, reciprocal sharing of what we've got and what we can offer, so that everybody's needs are met.

Aryae: It's really, really inspiring to hear your journey, Carolyn. I'm curious about the Good Samaritan Laws, which I assume will protect the food donors from liability. Where do those come from?

Patrice: They are both national and California laws.

Aryae: Does this mean that this could operate in other states and the food donors would be protected from liability?

Carolyn: Absolutely. And it is operating in other states. One of the things that we did as the word began getting out was that I received requests from all parts of the country: "How did you do it? We want to do it in our community." So I sort of assisted a lot of people in doing something similar but doing it in their own way, for their own community, using their own name. So there's no Daily Bread franchise, for example. And people are doing it all over the country, and I've never heard any feedback of things going wrong.

Patrice: One of our Daily Bread volunteers moved to New York and she very excitedly wrote me an email right after she moved. She said, "Guess what! I found something here that's just like Daily Bread and now I'm delivering food in my neighborhood here."

Prakash: How has your perspective shifted through this journey? How do you look at even a small morsel of food?

Carolyn: Well, all one has to do is witness hunger once to recognize the sacred nature of food.

I think we, who don't have a problem, can take it totally for granted that the meals show up on time. All you have to do is be hungry for a couple of days and it takes on an entirely different meaning.

And the meaning, for me, changed the way I looked at food growing in the garden. I've been working on farms and gardens for many, many years, just because I love to be close to the earth and to do this, but I remember once I was in a particularly emotional, filled with gratitude state. And I was harvesting carrots. When you pull a carrot from the ground, that carrot-earth smell is so strong that it just suffuses your whole body. So I pulled out this bunch of carrots and got that aroma, that carrot smell, and started to cry. I was just sitting there in the dirt with this bunch of carrots in my hands, sobbing. This was an unforgettable experience. In that high-flung emotion, I sort of recognized how it all went together—the carrot and myself, as a living being on the earth, totally dependent upon the earth and what came out of it. It was like, I got it. I got it.

So that's entirely different from feeling the pangs of hunger and buying a pizza slice on the street. You know, you just sort of take it for granted. You throw the crust away, you forget about it. But in reality, all our food comes from the earth. And therefore we are completely bonded to the earth and its production and its life. Our lives are completely intertwined.

Prakash: I can feel that reverence and gratitude for this gift we receive with every single morsel.

Carolyn: You know, it occurs to me, when I was in my late twenties, we lived in North India for a year, and worked there. I learned more in that year than I had in all the years before that about the reality of hunger and food. I grew up a relatively privileged kid in New York City, where I never saw food grown. Food came from the grocery store. In India, everything is right there on the ground. And I began to understand that you can't take anything for granted. You can't take life for granted. That everything is dependent upon everything and everyone. That we're all in this together, whether we think so or not. And therefore, self-interest really is the same thing as interest for the whole. Because if the whole is suffering, we are suffering. And if the whole is sad—in all the different ways of being sad—then we are sad. And otherwise not.

Amit: You've said everything you do is meant as a spiritual practice. Often, that involves the question of "Who am I?" or "What is my purpose in life?" How have you found or sought answers in that direction?

Carolyn: I was born Jewish and I tried to go that route. That wasn't big enough. I then went and studied medieval art history in the 12th century in Europe, and sort of went the Catholic route. Somewhere in there, I became a Zen student. I did the Buddhist route. I then sang in a Black church in the Gospel choir, seeking that route. And then I realized all of those routes were trying to say the same thing. But they also, for me, have the downside of being in these clunky organizations. And the organizations didn't satisfy me. So I figured out that I had a way of getting into that same ecstatic state—and it was through singing and dancing. So that was what I was going to do. So my spiritual practice is to dance everyday. To sing everyday. To meditate everyday. And to have others join me however and whenever and in whatever ways they are interested in doing so.