



Acting on her aversion to waste, Jill Staton Bullard helped launch the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle, which regularly feeds thousands in the Raleigh area.



Bountiful Harvest

Two Raleigh women find a way to bridge the gap between surplus and need.

Never underestimate the power of soccer moms who have set their minds to a task. Jill Staton Bullard and Maxine Solomon met while their sons were playing on the same team. “We were picking up breakfast sandwiches and coffee for the parents and noticed the servers were starting to throw away unused breakfast

sandwiches,” Bullard says.

“We were both struck with how wrong it was,” Solomon adds. “Having been raised not to waste food, it really bothered me.”

The experience spawned the vision for Inter-Faith Food Shuttle, a food-redistribution effort that has fed thousands of people in the Triangle and surrounding area for nearly 20 years.

BY DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN REGAN



Left: Folks at the State Farmers Market know Ann Bumgardner will see to it that no food goes to waste on her watch.

Below: Volunteers spend hours each week on the BackPack Buddies program to send food home with children in need.



Their initial efforts were modest. Returning to the same restaurant two days later, Bullard asked the manager for any good leftovers. She took 11 breakfast sandwiches to the Shepherd's Table Soup Kitchen at the Church of the Good Shepherd in downtown Raleigh, where volunteers from Solomon's temple often helped with cooking lunches. "They acted like I had handed them gold," Bullard says. "The sandwiches were quartered to feed more people. It was an experience I will never forget. I thought to myself, 'What a pitiful gift, and it is so precious to them.'"

The experience was life changing. "We incorporated ourselves three days later," says Solomon. Soon after contacting the health department to make sure they

were meeting sanitation requirements, the friends began making deliveries from the back of Bullard's station wagon. Her home was headquarters for three years.

Solomon's son, Eli, and Bullard's son, Dan, were the designers of the organization's first logo — the Star of David inside a cross. "What was really amazing is that we asked them separately to come up with a logo, and they came up with the same symbol incorporating our two religions, Christianity and Judaism," Solomon says.

Food rescue

Those 11 sandwiches grew into an operation that last year used 11 refrigerator trucks to transport 5.7 million pounds of food to 200 agencies

in seven counties. The transformation required hard work, dedication, and thousands of volunteer hours.

Bullard's other son, Ryan, was one of the first to think of a place where food could be collected. Working in the kitchen at Springmoor Life Care Retirement Community, he noticed food being thrown away. "We asked them to help us out, and they were more than willing," says Bullard, director of the shuttle. "Wonderful food was taken to the soup kitchen such as fried chicken, baked fish, salad, and whole lemon pies."

As word spread, others wanted to help. "Fathers and mothers who had pre-school and kindergarten children at St. Michael's Episcopal Church would take coolers of food to agencies. It literally became a food shuttle," Bullard says.

Other people stopped them on the street. "One day, I was driving the truck in downtown Raleigh, and a man in a big, fancy car started waving and asking me to pull over. When I did, Joe Wise from Carolina Vending got out and asked me if I took food. ... He said, 'I have food for you.'"

One tremendous boost to the organization's efforts was the passage of the "Good Samaritan" Law in North Carolina. Drafted by students from the University of North Carolina law school and a local attorney, Ann McColl, the law protects food donors who give in good faith.

The need for space grew along with the rescue efforts. The Inter-Faith Food Shuttle has moved several times but now shares a facility with Meals On Wheels, which is conveniently located behind the shuttle's primary donor site, the State Farmers Market. "We recycle approximately 1.2 million pounds of food to the shuttle a year," says Ronnie Best, State Farmers Market manager. "Tomatoes may start going south, but they could sure make a good tomato soup."

Donors and workers

Volunteer Ann Bumgardner spends four hours a day at the farmers



Volunteers like Sid Williams drive 11 trucks across the Triangle every day to deliver nearly six million pounds of food to 200 agencies in the course of a year.

market seeing that no usable food is discarded. According to Best, Bumgardner is a force to be reckoned with. "Ms. Ann is here first thing in the morning making sure nothing is wasted," he says.

Bumgardner has been inspecting and collecting food for the shuttle for 12 years and at one time drove a small pickup to collect food. "I used to do the afternoon run, too, but, at 78, it's a little hard,"

she says. She never fails to find good quality, fresh, healthy food. “The market is generous to us.”

Approximately 170 donors contribute up to 5.5 million pounds of rescued food a year. “Our difference is we rescue food and ... turn it around in two to four hours. We want to get it to folks immediately,” says David Reese, chief operating officer of food recovery and distribution. “With such quick turn around time, we really depend on volunteers.”

Emilie Sigel, the first regular volunteer, has done just about everything from picking up food at markets and grocery stores to delivering it to the Salvation Army. “It’s rewarding seeing firsthand how what you’re doing is affecting people,” she says. “The waste of food would be incredible without the shuttle.”

When she started out driving a van to the Shepherd’s Table Soup Kitchen, Sigel never would have thought the program would grow so large. “My husband and some of his fellow workers retired at the

same time from Burroughs Wellcome and started volunteering. Jill calls it her Ph.D. run,” Sigel says, laughing.

Meeting needs

Delivery drivers drop off rescued food at shelters and pantries like Catholic Parish Outreach, the shuttle’s largest recipient. “Last year, they delivered 761,300 pounds of food to us,” says Terry Foley, program director of Catholic Parish Outreach, which serves approximately 4,500 people a month. “We depend on their dedication for feeding the poor. People are coming to us now who thought they would never need to use our pantry.”

Need has also grown at the Shepherd’s Table Soup Kitchen, recipient of those first 11 sandwiches, which daily serves about 300 lunches. “Sixty percent of our food comes from the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle,” says Tammy Gregory, director of the kitchen. “Without the food shuttle, so many people would go hungry. They think of the smallest details, like sending

us ice cream so children who come here will have a treat. They also supply us with blast frozen food that we can store in our freezers for use during inclement weather when they can’t get here.”

Some of the food is prepared in the professional kitchen located in the center of the food shuttle building. Walk in, and you might smell a mouth-watering Italian stew being cooked by students of the Culinary Job Training Program, which began in 1998. “It was another way to engage more people and help break the chain of poverty. People now cooking there used to go through the soup line,” Bullard says. The 11-week program trains students in ServSafe, a nationally recognized safety and sanitation curriculum, and gives them marketable culinary skills.

Two other programs evolved to help fight hunger on the weekends. Every Saturday morning, volunteers pack 500 bags of groceries for delivery to seniors living on fixed incomes. “People realize what they’re doing makes the difference

between someone eating or not,” says Solomon, who’s in charge of fund raising. “The bags are full of fruits, vegetables, pasta, cereal, and some baked goods.”

BackPack Buddies is a program that sends healthy food home with children identified as in need by their schools. During the week, volunteers fill more than 500 backpacks with food for children to take home on Fridays or over holidays. The backpacks are stuffed with healthy snacks, canned fruit and vegetables, and breakfast items. “The bags are given out discreetly, and empty backpacks are recollected for the next week’s use,” says Janice Rosier, a volunteer who works with the program.

Rosier sets up tables for the packing operation and says some volunteers are students themselves. “Groups come in from schools and work really hard, singing songs and counting out loud while they’re packing,” says Rosier. “I call it controlled chaos.”

‘So many saints’

Recognizing the importance of nutrition education, the food shuttle works with more than 200 agencies teaching nutrition classes. Katherine Andrew, certified nutritionist, visits the agencies and teaches women, men, and children how to cook healthy meals. “We give them a bag of groceries and teach how to cook a meal from that bag’s contents,” she explains. “It’s fun teaching the children. When we go to organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, it’s so heartwarming to see how proud they are of their creations. We ask them to take pictures of their completed meals.” By “we,” Andrew means volunteers who shop for the groceries, help set up the cooking classes, or clean up afterward.

“They are the best people in the world,” says Emily Zartman, volunteer coordinator, of the 1,500 volunteers



Cooks at the Shepherd’s Table Soup Kitchen in Raleigh depend on Inter-Faith Food Shuttle for nearly 60 percent of the food they prepare and serve.

who make the magic happen. “And we have them from ages 5 to 80 doing everything — answering phones, filling grocery bags, entering data. ...”

Bullard and Solomon agree the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle couldn’t exist without volunteers. “It really is a very simple, basic instinct to help others, and when you know someone isn’t going to go hungry because of your kindness, it’s an incredible feeling,” Solomon says.

Being able to help others with a basic need keeps volunteers coming back. “The main reason we have so many returning volunteers is they know they are part of a process that’s keeping people from going hungry,” Bullard says.

She smiles thinking about all those volunteers, from the ones who once delivered food from the back of a station wagon to the ones who give up their Saturday mornings to pack groceries. “So many saints have walked through this organization’s doors.”

Diane Silcox-Jarrett writes from her home in Raleigh.

to know more

For a link to the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle’s website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on “This Month’s Issue.”