

Grow

Giving | Wildlife

Collect. Cook. Serve.

How to rescue food and feed people in under eight hours

By Matt Kelly



The rescue operation in action



In our last issue, we looked at the problem of food waste in the Rochester area. Now it's time to explore the process of claiming, processing, cooking, and serving that food to the hungry—on the spot.

"Meet me by Boulder [Coffee] before 1:30 if you want to see collection."

I've never before met David Tolar, or anyone with Food Not Bombs. All I have is this text telling me where to be if I want to see how they collect food and feed people—perfectly good food that vendors at Rochester's Public Market would likely throw out because they brought too much inventory and don't want to cart it away again. In many cases it's cheaper to just buy and bring more the following week.

You can't blame a business person for watching his bottom line. But how does it become a better idea—a more acceptable idea—to throw food away?

So I wait.

1:30 p.m.: Collect

A bald-headed guy with glasses and a neat beard approaches me. David?

"Yup." We shake hands and head towards the main shed. Tolar is all business and high speed—not a minute to spare. Food could be tossed at any moment, and opportunities lost. He and the other volunteers want to collect the food straight from vendors, before it ever hits a dumpster.

So what is Food Not Bombs?

"We're a local chapter of a really broad movement that's committed to taking action for peace and social justice," says Tolar as we push into the crowd. He first got connected with the movement in New Orleans. "Food Not Bombs has done a lot of different things through its history, but our focus is currently on rescuing food and providing free vegetarian meals to people in need."

And what is Tolar's role exactly?

"I don't have a role," he laughs over his shoulder. "If you're doing it right, nobody in Food Not Bombs has a title or assigned role. It sounds messy, but if I stop doing what I do for this group tomorrow, there are three or four other people ready and empowered to take my place."

We meet up with a small group of other volunteers gathered around a little yellow pushcart of dubious structural integrity. Tolar introduces me to Khoury Humphrey with Flower City Pickers.

Flower City Pickers?

"I'm a one-man show right now," Humphrey says as we take off through the crowd again. When he discovered that food was going to waste at the Public Market, he decided he needed to do something about it. "I needed a name because shelters wanted to know what group I worked with. I didn't

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really have anything to tell them other than: 'Nope, I'm just me.'

But Humphrey is growing Flower City Pickers. He's had folks ages five to seventy-five helping him. "We can always use more volunteers. Everyone is welcome."

Tolar and Humphrey met at the market. As both groups were trying to rescue food and feed people, it simply made more sense to coordinate and work together than it did to throw elbows and jostle for space.

Humphrey wears a white cloth sign on his back: "Collecting food for the shelters! Please donate. Talk to me." He approaches vendors, direct and to-the-point: "Is there anything you're throwing out that we can take for shelters and food pantries?"

There are plenty of dubious looks. But only a few vendors say no. There are plenty more that reply with, "Yeah, sure." Some vendors give just a few items, others give whole boxes: tomatoes, lettuce, pears, bread, whatever they have.

Humphrey has established relationships with some of the vendors already. They say hi, share a laugh. He accepts a bag of dry beans from one man. "This is great. He's never given us beans before."

All of these donations are piled high on the yellow cart, rolling along on questionable little wheels.

The volunteers make several runs through the market. When the cart is full, they take it to a drop point by the parking lot at the east end. There's a growing stockpile of food that's going to fill bellies instead of trash bags.

How much do they collect?

"I've never really had much free time to think about how much we collect. I'm always in a go-go-go mode," says Humphrey. "We usually fill up two or three vans or a few cars plus a truck on any given Saturday."

2:30 p.m.: Sort

The volunteers start sorting. I feel kind of stupid just standing there with my camera, so I help. "Sort by what's edible and what isn't," says Tolar. Anything inedible will be taken by a volunteer to compost.

Bags of bread and packages of cheap little donuts are easy. So are the boxes of onions. The lettuce requires some sorting through. There's a whole box of raspberries in plastic clamshells, a beautiful prize until you open them: they're covered in fuzzy white mold and clearly not edible. The pile of pears is a bit of a conundrum; they're bruised but not badly.

"We can juice them," says Tolar.

Humphrey takes a call: there's a pallet-sized box of discarded peppers in the alley on the other side of the market. We grab the little yellow cart and hurry over to find them. This is not typical: food is usually gleaned straight from vendors. But how do you pass up a pile of peppers sitting in some card-

Photos by Matt Kelly



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Prepping at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality

board box, not yet trash?

Give credit to Humphrey for building the right relationships. The man on the phone was Evan Lowenstein, coordinator of Communications and Special Events at the Public Market.

"The first time I met Evan was when market security wanted to know what I was doing here," says Humphrey. "I was really nervous sitting down with him."

But the first words out of Lowenstein's mouth were, "What can I do to help?"

Lowenstein isn't the only person from the city of Rochester who thinks what Tolar and Humphrey are doing is a good thing. "The Public Market exists to connect people to fresh, healthy, affordable food," says Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren. "Their dedicated work to collect viable surplus food that vendors might otherwise throw away—and giving that food to our neighbors in need—substantially reinforces the market's mission."

3:30 p.m.: Distribute

The food is eventually sorted into several different piles, each one headed to a different shelter or pantry.

"Each week I'll call shelters to ask if they can receive donations from us on Satur-

day," says Humphrey. "We try to work with a new place each week. Food gets distributed depending on what shelters will take and how much they'll be able to use in a timely manner."

"Between the two of us we've built a list of nine shelters and groups that want produce weekly," says Tolar.

All of the food is loaded into two vehicles—an old Jeep Cherokee and a beat-up Ford Ranger—which take off to make deliveries.

4:00 p.m.: Cook

One of the piles arrives at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on South Avenue, where more volunteers and a St. Joe's staff person are waiting to cook up the rescued food. Everything gets sorted again as it's pulled out of the boxes, making sure only really edible food goes into the meals.

Peppers and onions are chopped and sliced, then tossed into a giant skillet to become stir-fry. Beets and more onions and assorted other vegetables are roasted with spices. Grapes and bananas become fruit salad. There's a constant flurry of bowls and cutting boards and knives and constant discussion

about the possibilities for each item. A full-course meal is in the works.

It's ridiculous just watching all of this happen through a camera. So I jump in again.

"What do we do with these pears?" someone asks.

"Juice 'em," someone else replies. "Throw in the cucumbers, too."

While the meal is taking shape, Tolar heads out to walk the neighborhood and remind people about the dinner that'll be served tonight. "We've canvassed the neighborhood a few times with fliers, but mostly it's word of mouth in the towers by the park. The volunteers from St. Joe's have put the word out too."

6:00 p.m.: Serve

At 5:50 p.m., all of the cooked food is put into serving bowls and loaded onto another small cart, the kind you'd see a cafeteria lady pushing down the hallway. But Tolar wheels the cart straight out the door of St. Joe's and down the street a couple blocks to Nathaniel Square Park.

"On a good night we get twenty, maybe thirty people," says Tolar as we bump across Alexander Street. "We've only been doing

"What can I do to help?"

Put down whatever you're doing and lend a hand. Humphrey and Tolar are always looking for volunteers. Everyone is welcome. You can plug in whenever it works best for you. For more information:

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twice-a-month serves on purpose to keep volunteers from burning out and quitting. We started back up in the early fall and worked through the winter. It's hard to get people out when it's ten degrees and there's a foot of snow on the ground. But when we had good protein and dairy for the groceries, weather didn't matter."

There are easily thirty people waiting in the park when we arrive. They stand up and form a line as soon as the cart rolls in. Half a dozen kids are climbing on the rocks and running around.

The serving bowls are put out. Paper plates, utensils, and plastic cups appear. Tolar and Humphrey work the serving line. One of the volunteers breaks out a bag of toys for the kids: bubbles, a Frisbee, a Nerf football.

Yes, I put away my camera and pick up a ladle.

"What's that?" asks one man, pointing to the pitchers of juice.

"Pear-cucumber juice," says Humphrey, handing out full plates. Exactly the kind of thing you'd find in a store for five dollars a bottle. But provided here fresh and free.

The line moves. Plates and cups are filled. Some folks sit and eat in the park, enjoying the warm late-day sun; others take their plates and leave.

7:00 p.m.: Appreciate

As people trickle away from the square, they pick at the boxes of unprepared food that's available as groceries: bread and onions and a few other items. Eventually, the little park is empty.

This is the first time all day that Tolar, Humphrey, and the other volunteers have slowed down. They're talking, enjoying plates of the food they've prepared for others. It really is a good meal, worth getting seconds. And there's still plenty left.

What's going to happen to all of it?

"I'll put the groceries out front of my house for people to take," says Humphrey. He's got a big sign in his yard telling people that they're free. "It'll disappear."

Cynicism creeps in when he says this. Sure people will take the food, but do they really get what it represents? Do they appreciate what Humphrey is doing? Do they appreciate the care and commitment that Tolar and the other volunteers pour into this?

Humphrey smiles. He tells me about a note he found on his porch one day, along with a ten-dollar bill. The note read:

"I love you for giving free food and a sense of community."⁽⁵⁸⁵⁾

Matt Kelly is a writer living in the Finger Lakes, slowly turning his home into a self-sufficient, food-independent, backwoods place of his own. He works with Fruition Seeds in Naples, Small World Food in Rochester, and Lakestone Family Farm in Farmington. Matt writes regularly at BoonieAdjacent.com.

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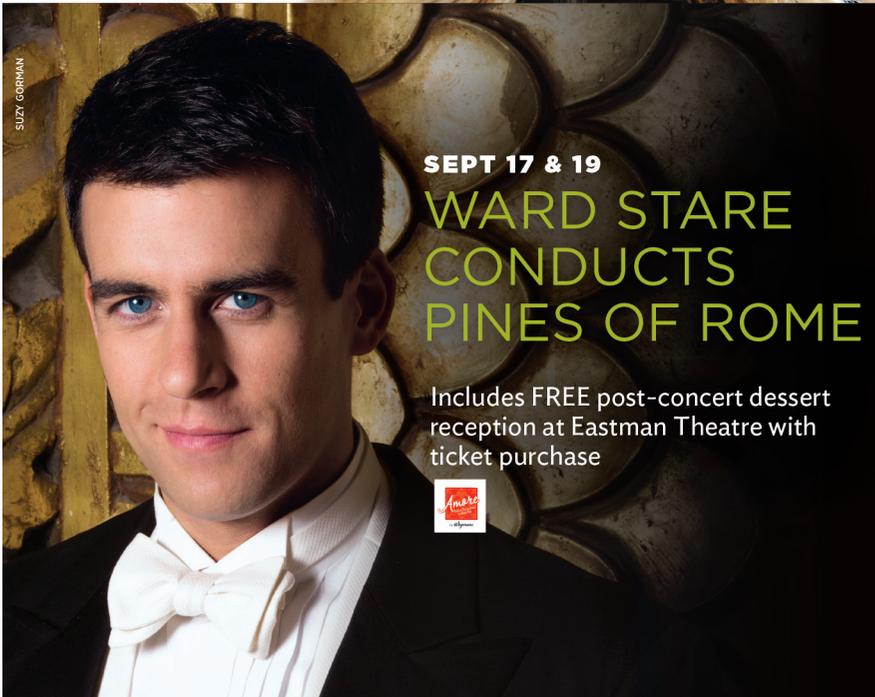
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