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URBAN HARVESTER MATCHES FOOD HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS

Broker helps agencies find suppliers of surplus groceries.

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SOUTH PASADENA › Linda Hess is a food matchmaker.

The South Pasadena resident spends hours every day speaking with restaurants, stores and supermarkets that have expiring food in order to connect them with nearby organizations that can distribute the food to needy locals before it goes bad.

It's easier said than done, Hess said. Restaurants may have cooked food to offer, but some organizations can distribute only packaged foods. Once she gets both sides in sync, though, her work is done. "All I ask is that they send me a postcard from the honeymoon," Hess said. In 2011, Hess founded the nonprofit organization Urban Harvester. Since then, she and a dedicated group of volunteers have worked to connect the haves and have-nots of food.

While the organization typically breaks even between donations and expenses, Hess is organizing Urban Harvester's first major fundraiser this month in order to develop a digital platform that will help do the matchmaking work for her.

Hess first noticed the potential of uneaten food at a funeral in 2009. Church staff packed up leftover food from the reception, and Hess thought it was for attendees to take home.

She was stunned to learn that the church instead was taking the food to older neighborhood citizens who were unable to shop for themselves.

"It broke my heart seeing these seniors, some whose pantries were completely empty except for a few cans of cat food," Hess said.

Not long after, Hess was stopping by local supermarkets, packing her Toyota Prius full of expiring goods and delivering them to local organizations that could distribute the food.

After two years of driving all over the San Gabriel Valley, she realized she could cut herself out as the middle man simply by connecting the two ends directly, and so Urban Harvester was born.

MATCHES MADE

While Hess has made hundreds of connections over the past three years, some of the most successful are in Pasadena. As a result of her efforts, Pasadena's AIDS Service Center, Union Station Homeless Services and Friends In Deed receive donated food at least once a week. The donated food comes from different places, but Trader Joe's is a major contributor.

Guy Conigliaro, food services manager for Union Station, said the homeless services center in Pasadena has received food for the past year and a half as a result of partnerships forged by Hess. The organization receives 150 to 200 pounds of fresh produce, meat and seafood a week, which Conigliaro said helps Union Station feed 250-300 people daily.

"Linda works tirelessly," Conigliaro said. "She's so devoted to this cause. It's quite inspiring to see her just never give up on it."

Hess also has reached out to several school districts so they know they don't have to throw away or compost their unused food. After meeting with South Pasadena Unified School District officials in 2011, the five schools in that city all donate their unused cafeteria food whenever the schools close for a holiday.

Despite Urban Harvester's reach, Hess said the organization has remained small because her efforts are spent entirely

on matchmaking.

The few thousand dollars the group gets in donations usually go toward fliers and T-shirts for volunteers, and in three years, Hess has yet to take a salary.

“I didn’t get into this because I wanted a second career,” said Hess, who used to work in movie and television production. “I want to do what’s right, and if I can take a salary eventually, that’s great.”

Right now, Hess’ priority is building a digital platform through which businesses with food can list what they have so local charitable organizations can find them easily.

In order to help fund that project, Urban Harvester is hosting a wine- and beer-tasting event at Fresco Community Market in the Hermon neighborhood of Los Angeles from 8-11 p.m. June 21. Tickets can be purchased for \$40 at urbanharvester.org.

“We’ve learned a lot from Linda, so we’re happy to help Urban Harvester,” said Robert Chavez, the market’s general manager. Fresco Community Market donates its expiring food to the Los Angeles Mission, thanks to Hess’ matchmaking work.

While Hess is hoping to grow her organization’s sponsorship base, she said she’s most looking forward to spreading her simple message even further.

“I don’t want to tell people not to compost their unused food,” Hess said. “I just want them to know there’s a step before that – the people step – where they can help others who have less and help eliminate hunger.”

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PHOTOS ED CRISOSTOMO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Eugene Davis with the Los Angeles Mission picks up donated food from Fresco Community Market.



Linda Hess visits with Nicholas Diaz as he rotates and inspects produce at Fresco Community Market. Hess says she is like a food matchmaker, putting together food sources and agencies.





PHOTOS: ED CRISOSTOMO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Veronica Flores, a Fresco Community Market clerk, helps Eugene Davis of the Los Angeles Mission load donated food from the grocery.



Linda Hess visits with Nicholas Diaz at Fresco Community Market, one of her sources for agencies that deliver food to people.