

# The Roots of Compassion

## Social Entrepreneurs in New York City

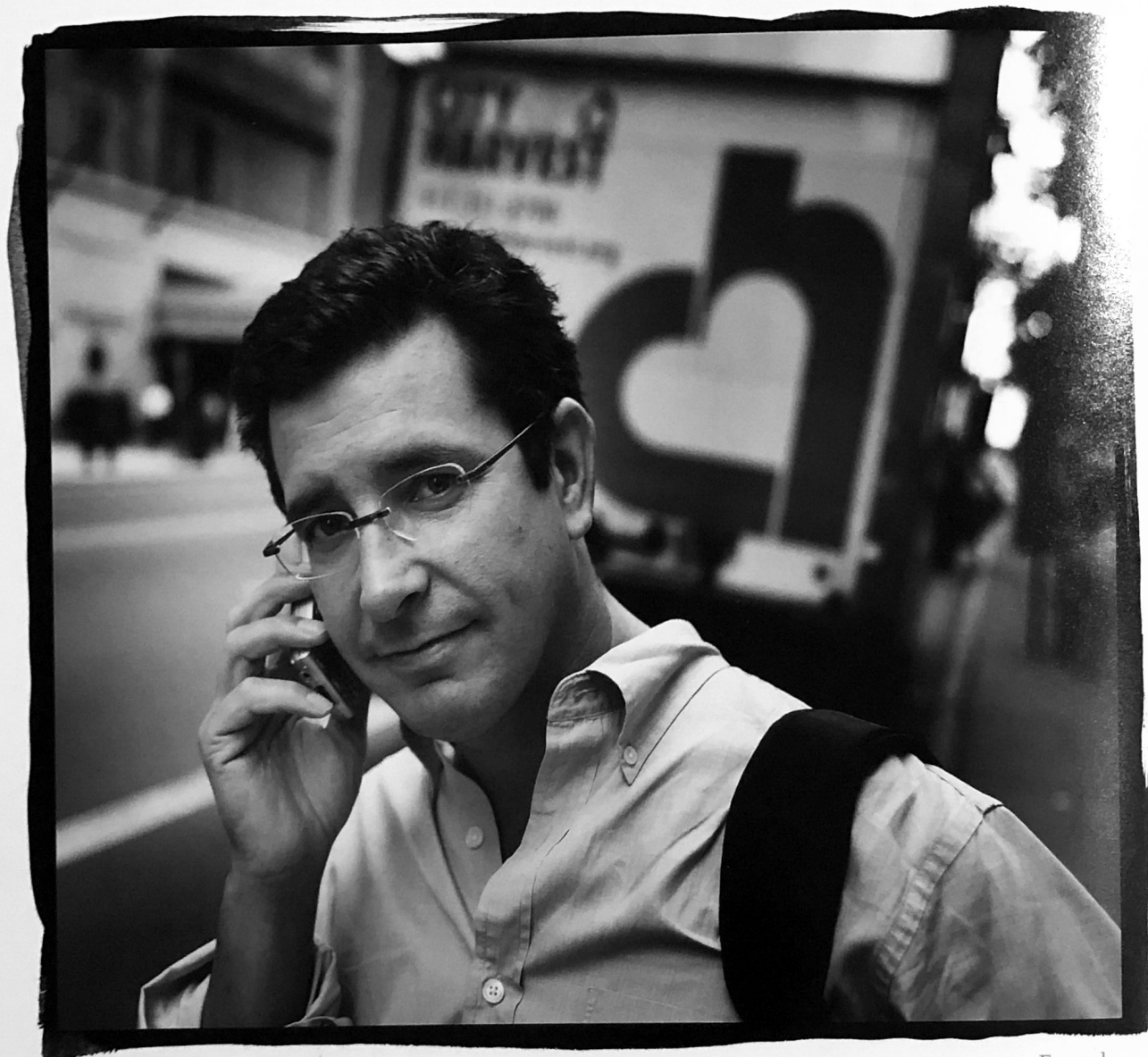
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THE *Mission* SERIES



. Jason Kliot

Founder

# City Harvest

*City Harvest exists to end hunger in communities throughout New York City. We do this through food rescue and distribution, education, and other practical, innovative solutions.*

As the largest and most efficient food producer in the world, the United States should be able to satisfy the basic nutritional needs of every man, woman, and child. And yet, according to National Anti-Hunger Organizations (NAHO), nearly 35 million Americans are threatened by hunger. 13 million of them are children. "We have failed to assure that every American is adequately fed. Instead, some children rely on a free school lunch as their only meal of the day. Many elderly people eat too little to maintain their health. And working parents often skip meals so that their children can eat" (A Blueprint to End Hunger, NAHO). In 1974, countries banded together at the World Food Conference to develop a plan that would eradicate global hunger within a decade. Many decades later, hunger has been cut by half in developing nations, and yet, according to NAHO, the United States—the richest country in the world—remains the only developed country to tolerate such widespread hunger on its own soil. In New York City alone, one million people rely on food from soup kitchens and other food programs, which are desperately under-funded and have trouble serving the exponentially-growing number of people. City Harvest distributes the excess food prepared by New York restaurants to underfed New Yorkers. In addition, City Harvest collects and distributes food, including produce from manufacturers, wholesalers, greenmarkets, hotels, corporate cafeterias, grocery stores, and farms.

Founder Helen verDuin Palit is one of two people responsible for the world's oldest food rescue program. As a soup kitchen worker, she was particularly sensitive to the good food that she saw going to waste in neighboring restaurants. In order to find additional resources for her own kitchen, she recruited volunteers. Using borrowed vans and cars, they picked up unused food and delivered it to areas where it could be put to good use. In another part of New York, New York University student Jason Kliot and his friends were developing a similar program to supply neighborhood food programs with rescued food from local eateries. From the combined efforts of these two individuals, City Harvest

expanded into a wide-reaching program, which remains the only one of its kind in New York City. Since 1982, City Harvest has remained true to its founders' original vision by salvaging 19 million pounds of excess food per year from the food industry. Through distribution to more than 500 agencies in all five boroughs, City Harvest is able to provide for more than 260,000 New Yorkers each week, by converting food—much of which would otherwise become waste—into nourishment. In order to accomplish this mission, a fleet of 15 trucks and a team of volunteers on foot deliver 53,000 pounds of rescued food daily to those who desperately need it.

City Harvest delivers food at the lowest cost possible. By picking up and delivering food the same day, the cost of delivering a pound of food is just 24 cents. Despite this cost-effective program, additional funding is still desperately needed to employ more drivers and acquire more trucks to pick up and distribute food. Volunteers and drivers are both trained in food safety, and the food they pick up from markets, delis, and warehouses is meticulously inspected. Though volunteers play an indispensable role in City Harvest's mission, by picking up and delivering within a neighborhood, trained drivers transport the majority of the food by truck. These men and women are the keystone of a large food rescue network that could be easily expanded with additional funds.

Eddie Berdecia has been driving a delivery truck since he got his license, and has been working for City Harvest for four years. At 32 years old, he could be easily confused for 22, with his baby face and kind eyes. Eddie drives a Brooklyn route that includes 20 stops after his initial visit to the hub, a warehouse in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The Big Apple Warehouse is nestled into the Navy Yard's village of storage buildings. A number of drivers are at the hub when Eddie arrives, all moving "skids"—cubes made up of pallets, which are made up of boxes—into their own trucks. Today's delivery includes potatoes, which Eddie says they haven't had for about four months, orange juice, yogurt, corn, and cabbage.

Farmers who donate to City Harvest—usually whatever they have a surplus of—receive a tax write-off, in addition to good karma. The men load their trucks while laughing, joking, and singing over a boom box playing songs from a local hip-hop station.

Another driver, Christopher Kirby, waxes philosophic between sarcasm and innocent complaints about pigeons and the smell of potatoes. “I work with an extraordinary organization,” he says, “it takes a lot of different people to make it run.” He points out that poverty and hunger are the most troubling social issues in New York City, but that even an organization like City Harvest faces a lot of government constraints, which increase costs. For instance, food must be chilled down to less than 40 degrees. Many restaurants in the city that might be interested in City Harvest’s mission simply don’t have the resources to comply with those standards. The cost of rent in New York makes extra storage space in food establishments extremely scarce. Christopher has been working with City Harvest for five years and has seen its mission grow to include more innovative solutions. “The beauty of this organization,” he says, “is that now we’re partnering with farmers and growers, we’re getting a lot of fresh stuff. It’s fantastic, because ultimately, you want people to have nutrition-rich food.” He also talks about the Navy Yard, pointing out the canons that remain from an era when the military built boats here. These days, storage facilities abound, and Robert DeNiro has opened a film studio.

Eddie’s first stop following the hub is the Park Slope Food Co-op, a unique private market where only members are allowed to shop and purchase food at a reduced cost. The co-op is able to keep the cost of organic and conventionally-grown food down by enforcing a member labor system, whereby all adults in a household are required to work a three-hour slot every month. Eddie signs a voucher after inspecting the broccoli, milk, ginger, and bananas before leaving the tree-lined brownstone neighborhood. Along the way to his next stop, Eddie explains how people see the truck and, depending which neighborhood he’s in, either ask how their business can get involved, or more often, how their community can receive food. Eddie has business cards

and extensive information on agency relations and available assistance. According to Eddie, though, City Harvest could use more assistance itself. “There aren’t enough drivers,” he says. “They haven’t really been hiring.”

The next stop is a drop-off. The Northside Senior Center is funded under a contract from the New York City Department of Aging and is connected to St. Ann’s Armenian Catholic Church, an immense red brick building with barred windows. The Senior Center looks less ominous, with a large arrangement of fake flowers in the front bay window. Eddie goes in through the side, past graffitied walls and through a series of chain-link fence gates. Mildred Moore meets him at the back, in an apron and hairnet, looking anxious to get back to the bustling kitchen behind her. She signs for the delivery and gives a hasty but sincere “thank you” to Eddie. Back in the van, Eddie explains that he has the longest route of any of the drivers, with 20 stops instead of 10 or 15. This is because he works a Brooklyn church and agency route. Brooklyn, it seems, has the most churches, per capita of anywhere in the country. If it were its own city, it would be the fourth largest in the nation, with over 2.5 million inhabitants. When asked how he feels about working for City Harvest, Eddie breaks it down: Not only is it a good job, but it also gives him a good feeling. “When I’m on the train to go home, I know I did something good,” he says. “I’m helping people.”

In another part of Brooklyn, where Eddie makes a delivery every two days, the Open Door Church of God in Christ, Inc., has 25 or so young adults in baby blue T-shirts unpacking boxes in front of a large warehouse connected to the church. Across the street, shoes have been thrown over a telephone line with the laces knotted—reportedly a sign that drugs are sold on that corner or in a nearby apartment complex. Tynese Taylor, the food program coordinator at the church, explains that the volunteers are a student group from Mississippi, and have been working in the heat since early morning. She goes on to proudly explain the mission of the church. “Many years ago,” she says, “Pastor Jerry V. Burns had a vision to feed the people.” He began his project by enlisting local bakeries and schools to donate English



City Harvest delivery truck

muffins and pastries. Eventually, the church program grew with the support of the community, and after a few sizeable donations, the Open Door Church of God was able to purchase the adjoining warehouse. According to Tynese, with the help of City Harvest and an extensive network of local support, they are able to serve thousands.

For some communities, City Harvest is a lifeline, responding most effectively to the widespread hunger that some areas of New York face. For one in five New Yorkers, community programs are an essential support system to combat poverty and food insecurity. Though more than 20 million pounds of food will be rescued by City Harvest street fleets and drivers this year, much more goes to waste and could be distributed with additional personnel. ■