

Hunger Still Happens Every Day: Philabundance to the Rescue

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

In 1984, Pamela Rainey Lawler, a business communicator, read *Starving in the Shadow of Plenty* by Loretta Schwartz-Nobel, a book documenting hunger in America. Lawler learned that despite massive efforts to eradicate poverty, the problem not only persisted, but was growing. At the same time, Philadelphia was in the midst of a restaurant renaissance. Lawler, who dined out and entertained often, remembers that time: "I was increasingly disturbed by the disparity between my life and the life of so many others in the city."

Through her research, Lawler learned that about 300,000 people in the Delaware Valley -- elderly, children, and families, invisible to the public -- regularly went without food, while 20% of food prepared for human consumption was wasted. Restaurants, bakeries, and caterers had leftover useable food and were willing to donate it, but couldn't transport it. Agencies that fed the hungry -- shelters, soup kitchens, and emergency food pantries -- needed the food but couldn't pick it up. Transportation was the missing link.

To fill the gap and test the theory that perishable foods could be moved safely and efficiently, Lawler began driving her station wagon, providing timely pick-ups of surplus food along with containers and a legal protection agreement. Business owners who were early donors include: Judy Wicks of the White Dog; Kathleen Mulhern of the Garden Restaurant; Steve

Poses of Frog/Commissary; Lynn Buono and Skip Schwartzman of Feast Your Eyes catering; Reading Terminal Market merchants; PeachTree Caterers; and the Chef's Market. The new idea caught on. Armed with funds raised from the Jewish Federation, the Philadelphia Archdiocese, and a private donor, Lawler took her business background and entrepreneurial zeal and started Philabundance.

Within a year, Mitsubishi donated a refrigerated truck and Philabundance hired a paid driver. Volunteers worked as drivers and fundraisers and donated communications services as well as legal and logistical advice.

Lawler established Philabundance as a formal 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, and she mobilized the food industry to donate food on a regular basis and to participate in annual fund-raising events. Ten years later, in 1994, with two refrigerated trucks, a van, a lean staff, and a cadre of volunteers, Philabundance had delivered more than three million pounds of food to 120 agencies feeding the hungry.

Since that time, the number of people in this area without access to enough food each day has grown to 900,000 -- a quarter of them children. Growing numbers of working people are also joining the ranks of those in need of food. Today, Philabundance provides meals to 65,000 low-income hungry people every week through its member agencies.



Jim Graham, Graham Studios

Pamela Rainey Lawler, founder of Philabundance.

Philabundance opened a state-of-the-art food center in South Philadelphia to receive and distribute food and house a growing fleet of trucks. In 2005, Philabundance merged with the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank. Donated food from manufacturers, distributors, regional farms, the port, and community food drives accounts for about 85% of food distributed to 500 agencies: food cupboards, shelters, residential programs, social service agencies, emergency kitchens, and neighborhood distribution programs. Philabundance provides fresh produce, bread, dairy products, canned and packaged goods, and prepared foods with an emphasis on healthy

and nutritious eating. The organization has 13 trucks on the road, six days a week, and two centrally-located warehouses.

Philabundance now runs its own direct service programs for seniors, children and infants, disabled people, families, and caregivers. In case of emergency, people can call the Food Help Line and get an emergency food box containing 30 pounds

of shelf-stable food, to supply a family of four people with three meals a day for approximately three days. A non-profit supermarket in Chester -- *Fare and Square* -- is due to open in the next couple of months.

The organization also helps provide food in case of large-scale national disasters. After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf area, Philabundance was the

fourth largest provider of food to the Gulf residents in need.

Individuals are the financial mainstay of the organization, contributing more than 60% of all funds donated. Additional support comes from corporations, foundations, and religious and civic groups. For more information and to learn how you can help, go to www.philabundance.org.