Putting Food on the Table Instead of Into the Trash
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Orange County prides itself on many things, including some of the finest restaurants on the West Coast. So it may surprise you that about 400,000 people – yes, that's five zeros – are at risk of going hungry in our county every month. At the same time, about 330,000 tons – yes, tons – of food are discarded by restaurants and grocery stores every year. It's pretty much the epitome of waste.

But since 1989, Food Finders has been trying to shrink both those numbers with their army of 300 volunteers who “rescue” perishable food from going to the dumpster and deliver it to one of more than 200 shelters, soup kitchens and food distribution centers. Unlike a food bank, Food Finders doesn't store the food, but transports it from places as small as your local restaurant or as big as the Honda Center to a shelter or soup kitchen.

“Last year we rescued 7.7 million pounds of food, and this year we’re on track to collect 8.3 million,” says Patti Larson, Food Finders' executive director. Larson says one of the things that makes Food Finders unique is that, while its trucks can pick up large quantities of food, it can also handle small amounts that large food banks can’t afford to commit resources to. “If someone calls and says they have 20 frozen hamburgers that they can’t use, we’ll go get them and deliver them to a shelter,” she says. It might seem small, but that's 20 more people fed. That's a good day.

One of the organizations that Food Finders delivers food to is Someone Cares Soup Kitchen, which has been feeding hungry and homeless families for nearly 30 years. Every day, the large Soup Kitchen hall is packed with more than 300 hungry men, women and children. Each is allowed to return to the food line three times, and can leave with a meal for later, says Soup Kitchen executive director Shannon Santos.

“It might sound like a lot of food, but we know that this might be the only food they get all day,” says Santos. And because so many of their clients are families with kids, in 2001, Soup Kitchen began a tutoring program for underserved elementary school children. The children get four hours of after-school tutoring a week at the Soup Kitchen.

This life-saving institution was started by the late, and most say great, Merle Hatleberg, Santos' grandmother. In the early '80s, Hatleberg was working for a government-funded program helping seniors get hot meals, run out of Costa Mesa High School. Then, Share Our Selves Soup Kitchen set up next door to pass out groceries. Their clients would wander over and ask Hatleberg for can openers. Instead of turning them away, she got a bunch of military surplus can openers to hand out. “They also smelled the hot meals, so she started passing out the extra hot food through the back door at the end of the day,” says Santos. “But the boss said she couldn’t do that because the food was earmarked for seniors. So she started bringing her own food to pass out.” That led to Hatleberg getting a permit from the city and starting the Soup Kitchen on her 63rd birthday, in 1986.

Feeding the hungry became Hatleberg's life's work from that moment on. All her time, and a considerable amount of her money, went toward the effort. “My grandmother was a very frugal woman and she saved and saved. So in 1997 she had saved around $100,000 over 11 years. One day, she and my aunt saw a For Sale sign on this building and she said, ‘That's the place,’” says Santos. Unfortunately, the bank disagreed and turned Hatleberg down for the loan.

However, being anything but a quitter, she contacted the building’s owner, So Ching Lee. Lee loved the work Hatleberg was doing and agreed to an owner-to-owner purchase, with the $100,000 as a down payment.“Lee
gave the down payment money to his sons, which they used as the seed money for Wahoo’s Fish Taco. And that whole family has been huge supporters of the Soup Kitchen to this day,” says Santos. By all accounts, it’s been a good investment in humanity – more than 300,000 meals are served per year at the Soup Kitchen.

Organizations such as Food Finders and the Someone Cares Soup Kitchen exist because individuals, corporations and foundations care. That’s why the Pacific Life Foundation gave more than $360,000 to the two organizations over the years, the café in the Pacific Life home office began donating its leftover food to the effort, and Pacific Life’s Good Guys employee volunteer force helps prepare and serve meals at the Soup Kitchen regularly. With continued effort, perhaps some of those zeros in the statistics for the hungry will disappear.