

# Driven to Serve

Table to Table marks 15 years as Northern New Jersey's first and only food rescue program

WRITTEN BY BROOKE PERRY



**W**hen she founded Table to Table 15 years ago, Claire Insalata Poulos never dreamed she'd still be at it a decade and a half later.

"Frankly, the simplicity of our mission – to pick up food that would otherwise go to waste and deliver it to those who needed it – seemed so straightforward," she says. "And yet, here we are, feeding an ever-growing number of our hungry neighbors and expanding as far and as fast as our resources will allow."

When Poulos says "neighbors," she means it quite literally.

"Our food rescue organization was founded by a group of local volunteers who recognized the importance of a fresh, nutritious meal and believed it to be their collective responsibility to ensure that everyone in our community had enough to eat," she says. "From day one, we determined that we would provide only one service and do it only within the geography of Bergen, Passaic, Hudson and Essex counties."

Resisting the temptation to delve into other program areas, Poulos feels "it's far more responsible to complete the job we have committed to do – finding more food and feeding more people."

From the very beginning, a culture of excellence and thrift, together with a set of razor-sharp business principles, was adopted.

"Given the resources of the community, it was decided that this program could be successful without government assistance and, instead, could thrive simply with the commitment of the people who live here," she says.

From this developed a policy of fiscal transparency and accountability that remains one of the program's greatest strengths. At least 98 cents of every dollar raised goes directly to the operation of Table to Table's fleet of trucks and the delivery of food.

What drives the Table to Table team is the seemingly never-ending stream of troubling statistics that paint a bleak picture of hunger in U.S. today. In April 2012, the USDA reported that 40 percent of food in the U.S. goes uneaten and, yet, one in six Americans doesn't have enough to eat.

"The safe retrieval of excess food from all segments of the food industry just makes sense for owners of supermarkets, farms, food manufacturers and restaurants – all of whom have the ability to help people within their own neighborhoods struggling to provide their families with nutritious meals," says Lawrence Inserra, Jr., president and CEO of Inserra Supermarkets and Table to Table's newest board member. "Without food rescue programs like Table to Table, community food pantries would be even more challenged to fill this gap at a time when there is growing demand among the elderly, individuals and families."

Table to Table's motto is simple: "We get

a dollar out of every dime," smiles Poulos, and, in fact, she does. The organization relies on volunteer and pro-bono services and takes seriously the money that is entrusted to it and the mission it has embraced. Unlike many programs that strive to feed the hungry and homeless, "our program is free of charge to all recipients," she confirms.

Not surprisingly, such judicious financial management has earned the organization a four star rating from Charity Navigator, the country's largest independent evaluator of charities, for four straight years. It is also ranked third in the state for efficiency and effectiveness. According to Ken Berger, Charity Navigator's president and CEO, only seven percent of the charities rated by Charity Navigator have received at least four consecutive four star evaluations, indicating that Table to Table outperforms most other charities in America.

Poulos takes the praise in stride. She says the simplicity of food rescue allows them to deliver food at the cost of just 10 cents per meal.

"Table to Table is truly a hunger relief machine," says Marc Cohen, executive vice president of Western Carriers, Inc., one of Table to Table's earliest supporters. "I was drawn to Table to Table because of the passion of its leaders and their ability to translate a giant vision into a remarkably efficient food rescue operation. They work hard to make giving back very easy."

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