

HOMETOWN HERO: ILENE ISAACS

A meal for every table

Heaps of still-edible food are wasted each day. The community wants to buck that trend and feed its neighbors instead.



Mother always taught us to clean our plates, that starving children in other countries would never waste what food kids in the U.S. would typically toss in the trash. Little did she know that hunger could hit much closer to home. “You wouldn’t think people in Bergen County need help because it’s a relatively affluent area,” says Ilene Isaacs, executive director of Table to Table. “But the need for food continues to grow. The economy isn’t good for many people in the counties that we are serving.” Englewood Cliffs-based Table to Table was created 17 years ago to lend a helping hand to residents struggling to find nutritious meals. Considering that 40 percent of the country’s food—meat, produce, baked goods and other perishable items—goes uneaten and gets dumped in landfills, the organization collected the fresh leftover food from donor restaurants,

grocers and farmers’ markets. For years, they used a single van to deliver food to their clients, a “handful” of agencies in Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Passaic counties.

Today, they operate similarly but on a larger scale: Six refrigerated trucks transport the fresh donations—nothing boxed, nothing canned—to more than 80 agencies in the four counties. “This year, we’ll pick up enough food to make 16 million meals,” says Isaacs, who’s been a part of Table to Table for the past 15 years. “We start the day with empty trucks and end the day with empty trucks. Everything we deliver will be on a table that night.”

Freshness is the difference, she says, between Table to Table and other service groups and food pantries, which usually provide nonperishables and uncooked items. The food that’s “rescued” from restaurants and grocery stores at the end of the day is still perfectly edible; most just require refrigeration.

So who gets these rescued meals? Recipients include organizations like Paramus-based Children’s Aid and Family Services and Bright Side Manor in Teaneck as well as food pantries in Cresskill and Hackensack and shelters for homeless and victims of domestic violence. “But everyone gets more than just the nutritional value of the food,” says Isaacs. “There’s so much more that’s attached to food. We’re delivering hope and reassurance. It’s reassuring when you can sit at a table and see your children and family eating something good.”

“It’s difficult for a person to focus on other things when the most basic needs like eating can’t be met,” she continues. “Each meal we deliver represents someone who needs help—we might know them, we might not. But they’re all our neighbors.”

At other times, they’re also delivering excitement. Isaacs loves seeing the reactions of overjoyed immigrant families when they receive certain produce. “Some used it in their native countries but haven’t been able to afford and cook with the produce in the U.S. We see some extraordinary gratitude when we bring something that was so important to their upbringing,” she says.

Then there is the story of a little girl who was given an orange. “It was the first time she had ever seen and held one,” Isaacs notes. “She didn’t know what to do with it, but she was so excited. We can take food for granted sometimes.”

For more information about Table to Table, visit tabletotable.org.

