

Corporations ‘fork it over’

Instead of going to landfills, ‘mistake food’ makes its way to area’s working poor

By Kelly Moyer-Wade

The Gresham Outlook Nov 21, 2006

’Tis the season for giving, and several East County businesses are getting into the spirit, doling out millions of dollars worth of food and drinks for the less fortunate.

“It’s a waste to throw away good food when you can feed people who need it,” says Ken Kuhn, owner of the Gresham Flying Pie Pizzeria shop.

Kuhn donates all of his shop’s “mistake” pizzas to the Frontier Mission in Troutdale, and says the community service group has been a good partner over the years.

“They come in automatically once a week to see if we have anything,” Kuhn says of Frontier Mission volunteers. “They’re great about picking it up, and so I’ve been loyal to them.”

Other business owners who donate “mistake” products (food that is perfectly good to eat, but doesn’t meet stringent manufacturing guidelines) agree with Kuhn. They say a community organization’s willingness to pick-up the food makes it easier for them to give.

“For me, it’s important that, when we have donations, and need to get it out of the freezer to make room, that they come and get it right away,” says Rick Teeny, head of Teeny Foods, an East County company that manufactures products such as pizza and breadsticks and donates thousands of pounds of “mistake” products each year.

That’s one reason Teeny prefers to donate to Birch Community Services.

“As soon as we call (Birch Community Services) and tell them we have a donation, they come and pick it up,” Teeny says.

Birch Community Services is a nonprofit Gresham organization that collects food, clothing and other products from dozens of companies in the Portland-metro area and – through partnerships with about 50 other nonprofit organizations – helps feed nearly 10,000 of Oregon’s “working poor.”

Its founder, Barry Birch, says that in the 14 years since Birch Community Services first began (with a couple bags of donated bread served off Birch’s front porch near Mount Tabor) he has had no trouble collecting donations from Portland-area companies.

“We’ve never been in the position where we have to fight for donations,” Birch says.

The donations vary day to day, and Birch takes calls all day from various companies to donate things like 100 frozen turkeys, 440 whole chickens, a couple pallets of Diet Cherry Vanilla Dr. Pepper, or 2,200 containers of olive oil.

“A truck tipped over, apparently, and Holman Transfer called us to see if we wanted the olive oil,” Birch says. “That’s about \$50,000 worth of olive oil!”

Some of the organization’s largest contributors include Albertson’s and Henningsen Cold Storage, which provides cold storage to major companies like Nestle and often has surplus items they want to donate.

“Last year, Henningsen donated enough turkeys for all 650 of our families,” Birch says.



Carole Archer / The Outlook

Rick Teeny, head of Teeny Foods, surveys a pallet of frozen pizzas ready for donation on Tuesday, Nov. 21. Teeny donates thousands of pounds of food to Birch Community Services, which in turn distributes corporate donations to nearly 10,000 people each year.

Companies donated more than eight million pounds of food to Birch Community Services last year alone. That is more than enough to feed the families Birch serves directly, so the organization has expanded its horizons.

“About one-fourth of what we collect goes to other agencies,” Birch says. “We’re serving more than 50 other agencies now.”

City encourages companies to ‘fork it over’

According to Gresham City Councilor Paul Warr-King, more than 50,000 people in the metro area receive emergency food boxes each year.

“Most are working families with children, the retired or elderly on fixed incomes,” Warr-King wrote in a letter urging Gresham companies, residents and non-profits to donate extra food this holiday season.

“Gresham non-profit food rescue agencies are experiencing greater need for donations as they near the holiday season,” Warr-King says. “Although the demand is truly year-round, families and the elderly often have increased utility expenses during the winter, reducing their budgets for food and increasing the burden on agencies that provide emergency food.”

The city of Gresham has joined in Metro’s six-month-old “Fork it Over” campaign, which urges businesses and community members to donate extra food to area non-profits, such as Birch Community Services, the Salvation Army, Snow-Cap Charities, Sandy Community Action and Zarephath Kitchen.

More than 68 businesses in the Portland area have joined in the “Fork it Over” campaign and are donating fresh, frozen and packaged surplus food to area non-profits.

For Boyd Coffee Company, the “Fork it Over” campaign came at just the right time.

Typically, the 100-year-old coffee manufacturer donates all of its “mistake” products, including gourmet coffee, coffee syrups, food products such as muffin mix, and teas, to the Oregon Food Bank. This year, the city of Gresham’s letter regarding “Fork it Over” arrived at an ideal time.

“We happened to be putting together a donation load, and then we got a phone call from the city, asking if we’d seen the Fork it Over flier,” says Rob Carlson, assistant manager of Boyd Coffee Company’s coffee production division. “The flier was right in front of me, on my desk, with a list of organizations in need. ... Timing was everything.”

The company is still loyal to the Oregon Food Bank, but Carlson says he was impressed by the list of agencies the city of Gresham recommended.

Earlier this week, Boyd Coffee Company donated a huge pallet of food products, including soups, sauces, puddings, teas, coffees and gourmet mixes, to Birch Community Services.

“It was really good stuff,” Birch says of the Boyd donation. “Teas, coffee, muffin mix ... just some really good stuff.”

“Sometimes I’m amazed that we’ve grown from two bags of bread on my front porch 14 years ago to this,” Birch adds, surveying the rows of donated goods his volunteers have prepared for the families they serve. “We are so fortunate. I can’t imagine a more rewarding job.”