



Urban Gleaners mission: waste not, want not

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Tom Hallman Jr., The Oregonian



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Eva Ozbek, her backpack overflowing with bread and pasta, waits with North Powellhurst classmates to go home on the school bus. Students at the school receive food from Urban Gleaners, a nonprofit that collects food from stores and restaurants that otherwise would go to waste. The kindergartners have their coats on and packs slung over their backs when teacher Katherine Macomber calls them to the front of the class for the drawing. It's been a long day, and parents are waiting in the hall to take them home. But the kids scurry to sit, knee to knee, in a semicircle.

"So who's going to be the lucky one today?" Macomber asks. All hands go up.

In the back, a petite woman, a stranger to the kids, steps toward school Principal Kate Barker, who has come to watch the drawing. Tracy Oseran leans in and whispers: "This is the best reward I can get."



View full size Faith Cathcart/The Oregonian North Powellhurst

teacher Katherine Macomber ends the day with a drawing in which every student receives food to take home. Sadie Kopperman (second from left) is among those who get fresh baguettes and other items. Drawings take place twice a week in each classroom at the all-kindergarten school. It's prize day, a twice-weekly event in every classroom at North Powellhurst School, a 275-student, kindergarten-only school in outer Southeast Portland. Without Oseran, many of the children and their families would go hungry.

Three months ago, Oseran adopted the school as part of a larger effort to funnel unsold food from restaurants and stores to needy people across the metro area. She founded Urban Gleaners five years ago and otherwise provides food to social service agencies.

To make sure no child feels stigma or shame, North Powellhurst teachers rig the drawings -- based on information parents discreetly give Barker -- so the neediest kids get a backpack stuffed so full they can barely zip it up. The kids bump into chairs, nearly toppling over as they file out of class. Every child leaves with something, maybe a package of cookies or a loaf of good bread.

"The drawing is fun," says Sadie Kopperman, 5. "People like getting picked. It's exciting to get picked."

One parent recently stopped Macomber in the hall with tears in her eyes to say that without the food, her family of five would have had nothing to eat for days. The mother said she had to scrounge for change to buy gas to bring her daughter to school.

And so the Thursday drawing begins.

Macomber pulls slips of colored paper from her hand, calling out names and inviting each child to come to the front for food. The class applauds when each name is called.

Then there's the girl who walks shyly to the front and stands before Macomber, sitting in a chair at the blackboard. The girl is the day's big winner. She is given fresh ravioli, sausage, salad, vegetables and dessert from Pastaworks.

Urban Gleaners

Funding: The nonprofit has a \$75,000 annual budget that pays for gas, rent on a small warehouse and one full-time and one part-time employee. Money comes from private donations and grants. Director Tracy Oseran, who receives no pay, also makes Tracy's Small Batch Granola, which she sells in Portland stores, funneling all proceeds to Urban Gleaners.

"There's something so moving about seeing these little faces," Oseran says as the kids head into the hall. "Hunger among adults is visible. But we don't see these children in school."

She watches as the big winner turns to show her mother the full backpack.

Oseran lives in the West Hills with her husband, a cardiologist. Their children are in college. She begins her morning at Zupan's Market on West Burnside Street, rescuing food that would otherwise be thrown out.

"This is phenomenal," says Oseran, poking through boxes of fruit, handmade and gourmet pasta and sauce. "The kids are going to love getting some of this."

Oseran, 56, struggles to lift heavy boxes onto a rolling cart. She pushes the cart out a door and across a parking lot, where she fills the back of her station wagon.

As she pulls into traffic, she talks about the kids at North Powellhurst. As much as she's changed their lives, they've changed hers, too.

"Last month, there was a boy crying in the principal's office," Oseran says. "It was his birthday. The kids usually bring cookies to the class. But his family had nothing; no money or food. But we'd brought some food by that day. The principal found a box of cookies and brought them to the boy. She told him the cookie fairy had come to his school."

Oseran shakes her head. "You hear a story like that," she says, "and it's overwhelming."

The idea for Urban Gleaners took root after Oseran heard a radio report about an East Coast organization that redistributed food from grocery stores. The self-described "liberal and child of the '60s" figured Portland needed just such an operation.

She checked around and found food pantries but no organized effort to redistribute unsold food from stores and restaurants. She told her two children, teenagers then, that they would help launch the plan. Her husband was supportive.

How to help: Oseran says donations and more volunteers are needed. "Even \$15 helps," she says.

Learn more:
urbangleaners.org

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"I'm sure my kids thought I was nuts," Oseran says. "They figured it was another of mom's moments."

Oseran's kids called around to restaurants in the Pearl District to see whether any would donate. No luck. But Oseran knew the chef at Bluehour, a fine restaurant in the Pearl, and made a personal pitch.

"We picked up a couple of containers of great fava bean purée," she recalls. "It looked so good that I thought about bringing it home to eat myself. I called one agency, and they didn't seem that interested in getting it. So I called the Blanchet House, and they told me to come on by."



Faith Cathcart/The

Oregonian Tracy Oseran, who founded and runs Urban Gleaners, talks with Rayontae Manning, 2, between bites of his roll. Oseran began her nonprofit five years ago. Now Urban Gleaners collects an estimated 40,000 pounds of food each month. Recipients include North Powellhurst School and the child development center, which Rayontae attends, that shares the building. From that emerged Urban Gleaners, now with 30 volunteers, a small warehouse and two employees -- a full-timer who does the books and coordinates volunteers, and a part-time driver. Oseran takes no pay.

The group collects an estimated 40,000 pounds of food a month and distributes it, mainly through the Blanchet House, to eight area agencies.

"I grew up from a very privileged background," Oseran says. "My father was a TV director, and I lived in Beverly Hills. Hunger was something I didn't see. I don't have to do this. I feel committed. My philosophy is that government is not going to solve all our problems. It's going to be people who see a need and get up in the morning to do something about it."

Patrick Daley, the Blanchet House manager, says Oseran has made a "huge impact" at his organization, which offers food, shelter and clothing in Old Town.

"She's brought in a wide variety of food," he says. "She's also been able to give one of our drivers, who works here in exchange for room and board, a part-time job as a driver with her group."

A few months ago, when Oseran was invited to speak at a Northwest Portland synagogue, she mentioned that many organizations don't know what to do with all the donated bread. The Blanchet House, Daley says, gets more than 1,000 pounds a week.

A woman in the audience said her daughter attended North Powellhurst and that the school would welcome the bread. Oseran contacted Barker, the principal, who embraced the idea. Within days, Oseran began making deliveries, eventually expanding the operation to serve the entire school.

"She's an angel," Barker says. "She has provided for hundreds of families. Some of these children come from homes where there is nothing in the cupboard. The only meals they would receive are the breakfast and lunch we serve here."

-- **Tom Hallman Jr.**

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