

THE EXPRESS

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Harvest
Reaping the Benefits

Families are fed when the harvest is shared



WINTER'S VEGETABLE GARDEN ≈ OTTERS RETURN ≈ ETSY ENTREPRENEURS
A CACHE OF ANTIQUE PHOTOS ≈ HIP TO HEMP ≈ CELEBRATED COLESLAW

SHARING THE HARVEST, FEEDING THE PEOPLE

A FARM IN EAST HAMPTON IS
DESIGNED TO HELP PROVIDE
FOR LOCAL FOOD PANTRIES

BY CAILIN RILEY

Last summer, Share the Harvest Farm hosted its annual barbeque dinner in the field at EECO Farm in East Hampton. The event is the organization's top fundraiser of the year, enabling the farmers of the six-acre plot (which it leases from EECO Farm, a nonprofit that manages the 42 acres of farmland owned by the town) to continue their mission of growing high-quality produce for donation to local food pantries and other organizations in the area. The goal is to help reduce food insecurity and provide all families access to fresh, locally-grown healthy fruits and vegetables. Typically, a small swath of unfarmed land is cleared and long rows of tables are nestled in the field for the barbeque. This year, instead of hosting a gathering that would have celebrated 11 years of the farm's existence, the cleared area is hosting broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower instead.

When it became clear that the coronavirus pandemic would render such a large gathering untenable, the stewards of Share the Harvest Farm (formerly known as Food Pantry Farm) did what they do best — adapted.

Their ability to not only respond to but thrive under pressure is more important than ever these days, as a rapid rise in food insecurity driven by the pandemic has doubled and even tripled the number of local residents relying on the food pantries and other organizations the farm supports.

Jess Tonn is the administrative director for Share the Harvest and has managed the farm stand for the past few seasons. She's been with the farm since 2017, and is a year-round, full-time employee, along with field production director Rose Schellinger. Tonn said that while the cancellation of the summer barbeque created a financial pinch at a particularly bad time, it feels good to survey the field and see how the empty space was put to good use in another way.

"I would say that 2020 is a kind of year that our farm was built for," she said.



SAMANTHA HUNT PICKS PEPPERS AT SHARE THE HARVEST.

DANA SHAW PHOTO

Share the Harvest Farm was founded in 2009, (with its first growing season in 2010), by a group of local retirees who believed that food pantries should be stocked with more than just canned and non-perishable goods, and that income status should not determine who can access fresh, healthy produce. Of that original group of founders, three are still involved with the farm on a regular basis — John Malafronte, Jane Baringer and Ira Bezosa.

The mission behind the farm deeply resonated with John Malafronte, who, at the age of 87, still is intimately involved with fundraising efforts and visits the farm to offer whatever help he can, even as he admits, with regret, that he's past the age where he can get his hands dirty during harvest time.

He speaks passionately, and with the energy of someone decades younger, about what he believes is a fundamental right, one that has wide-reaching benefits.

"Fighting food insecurity is our main objective," he said. "There's no reason you should have to make X amount of dollars to get good vegetables. If you can make a family happy, they will produce more for themselves and the community."

Malafronte has watched the farm grow from a small half-acre plot delivering produce — often from the back of Malafronte's car — to a few local food pantries, to a six-acre endeavour with several full-time employees and a cast of interns from across the country and the world, serving 10 local organizations, including five food pantries, several churches, a senior housing center, and The Retreat, a women's shelter.

To outsiders, the Hamptons might not seem like a place that has a high demand at food pantries, but Tonn pointed out that plenty of local residents face food insecurity similar to other areas of the country.

"Some people might not realize that the people working in restaurants and mowing lawns and cleaning pools are also living out here, and it's one of the most expensive parts of the country to live in," she said. "You can be working full time and still need to go to the food pantry."

Ms. Tonn pointed out that Share the Harvest does not charge the food pantries any money for the produce they provide and said that only a small portion of the food they grow is sold at the farm stand, to help offset some operational costs.

Like every business or nonprofit, Share the Harvest has been dealing with challenges related to the pandemic, which has created problems aside from just limiting fundraising opportunities. The farm had to change its staffing model in March — instead of its usual practice of hiring college students from around the country and even the globe who are studying agriculture, they had to put out a call for local volunteers.



SHARE THE HARVEST FOUNDER JOHN MALAFRONTE.

DANA SHAW PHOTO



VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF AT SHARE THE HARVEST IN EAST HAMPTON PICK PEPPERS.

DANA SHAW PHOTO

Tonn said the response from the community was overwhelming, and has enabled the farm to keep doing its important work — which is key, because demand has skyrocketed.

Holly Wheaton is a chairperson with the Springs Food Pantry and said that food insecurity there has increased 350 percent during the pandemic.

"Because many Springs residents are the working poor whose livelihoods are marginal, and low employment and underemployment combined with fixed expenses keep them from having enough money to buy food," she said, adding that she's grateful for the donations from Share the Harvest and others, like Balsam Farms and Amber Waves Farm, who also donate a diverse array of fresh produce on a weekly basis.

Even with those generous contributions, the numbers are staggering, and have many operators of food pantries anxious about what the fall and winter months may hold. In 2019, the Springs Food Pantry served a weekly average of 55 families (a total of 195 household members), according to Wheaton. Since March of 2020, the pantry is averaging 168 families, for a total of 606 household members, each week.

"Seasonal summer jobs typically reduce the number of recipients requesting our assistance, but this summer, with the reduced availability of jobs and Covid restrictions, the reduction is marginal," Wheaton said. "Last year at this time, we were feeding 27 families and 133 household members."

Evenlyn "Evie" Ramunno, who has been with the Sag Harbor Food Pantry for more than 20



ROSE SCHELLINGER OF SHARE THE HARVEST DELIVERS PRODUCE TO THE ELEANOR WHITMORE EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER IN EAST HAMPTON. *DANA SHAW PHOTO*

SHARE THE HARVEST

years, is seeing the same trend as Wheaton. She said that summer attendance is typically in the neighborhood of 37 to 45 people, but when the pandemic started in March, it wasn't unusual to see 120 people showing up.

"That has gone down a bit in the past three or four weeks, because I think some people are back to work again, but as I look to the fall, I'm sure we'll see our numbers rise again," she said.

Like Wheaton, Ramunno had glowing praise for Share the Harvest, saying the people they serve at the pantry look forward to the fresh produce and the variety the farm strives to provide, from fresh garlic and herbs to spinach and radishes and everything in between.

"We hope to continue our relationship with them for many years," she said. "They're all so friendly and kind and thoughtful. They're all good folks, and they're doing the good work."

When Malafronte looks to the future, he has a clear vision of what he wants to see as well, and it centers, not surprisingly, around doing more. He'd love to see the farm increase its storage and refrigeration capacity, and has dreams of facilitating indoor vertical farming; all innovations and solutions that would allow the farm to meet the growing needs of the community. The farm added a 3,000 square foot greenhouse in recent years, helping to foster production in the colder months, and there are plans

in the future to increase canning and freezing capacity. Making those dreams a reality takes money, of course, which is why Malafronte remains passionate about fundraising even as he approaches his 90th birthday. While he acknowledged that he might not be around to see all those dreams come to fruition, Malafronte said he's proud of how far the farm has come already, and everything it is doing, particularly in such challenging times, to provide the most basic needs for members of the community.

"It's the most joyous thing in my life, aside from my family," he said.

As the farm managers look ahead to the fall and winter, they have their focus on continuing to harvest vegetables and provide the bounty of that harvest to their partners through the holiday season and beyond. The extra produce planted in the peace sign will, Mother Nature willing, be ready for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Tonn said the farm also switched some of the varieties of produce it grows, choosing vegetables with longer storage capacity to help meet the anticipated increase in need. Varieties of butternut squash, for instance, have a longer shelf life and don't all have to be donated at once, giving the farm a chance to provide food into January.

"Farming in general is about constantly responding to the environment," Tonn said. "Adding a pandemic to it is just another variable." ■