Notes from the Field

Being a Good Citizen: Volunteering at the Clark County Food Bank
By Beth Baker

Clark County Food Bank (CCFB) in Vancouver, WA, operates the 78th Street Heritage Farm with the help of nearly 1,000 volunteers a year. In the 2015 growing season the ten acre farm produced over 100,000 pounds of produce for the food bank. Executive Director Alan Hamilton spoke with NWH about his philosophy around encouraging volunteerism.*

NWH: Tell me how the CCFB farming program gets volunteers involved at the food bank.

AH: My first exposure to the CCFB was volunteering at the farm. It was how I found out that the food bank even existed. That’s pretty typical - that’s my story but it’s a lot of people’s stories. We use the farm as a kind of funnel for people who both want to help and don’t yet know about the food bank.

For example, my daughter’s cross country team was looking for a service-related team event. I suggested the food bank and farm, so they came out a few weeks back and did a carrot harvest. Afterwards we did a lunch for them, and talked about the food bank and why working together as a team is important. They used the volunteer experience as a team building event, but for the girls and for a few of the parents that attended it was their first exposure not just to volunteering but also to the food bank. So of the 6,500 volunteers we have, maybe a third to a half of them started at the farm as their introduction to the food bank.

NWH: So at least for initial volunteering experiences, is information and education a big component? Like for your daughter’s cross country team?

AH: My daughter’s team would have just gone home and said, “Well, we worked at a farm,” and probably had a pretty good time doing it, but it’s too easy to not do much more. The context we provided helped them realize that this is what being a good citizen looks like.

Recently a group of kids who raise livestock came to the food bank for their annual dinner. The group raises animals and learns about animal husbandry, then auctions the livestock off at the county fair, and the people who buy the livestock donate the meat to the food bank. So the kids were here celebrating their year and how much meat they were able to donate. My talk to them wasn’t just, “Hey thanks for meat, meat is really important,” but instead, “Thanks for being a part of helping your community. Here’s how that food goes out and here’s how we use it, and here’s why that really matters.”

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.
So we encourage multiple age groups at the farm. We want people to bring their kids, because even 2 and 3 year olds can pull a carrot, and if they come back over the next few years it’s a part of their story, and it’s an integrated element to how their family gives back. I mean, that may not directly benefit the food bank, but its primary benefit may in fact be for something 10 or 20 years down the road when that young person is making life decisions about what they are going to be about, whether it’s the super career or the big house or something that might benefit others more than them.

We try to create energy around the path of becoming a good citizen, or what I would call a young philanthropist. If people just volunteer at the farm that’s good, but it’s even better if we help them see that this could be the gateway to a lifetime of engagement. Whether that ever involves a lot of money or not doesn’t necessarily matter, but it does involve giving away of self to help other people.

For more information about the Clark County Food Bank, see [here](#).

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email [growingconnections@northwestharvest.org](mailto:growingconnections@northwestharvest.org), or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423