Sharon Mobley admits that she will talk your ear off about the Othello Food Bank if you let her. The Director and Facilities Manager of the Food Bank has found that personal connections are essential to growing a strong farm to food bank program. Sharon has lived in Othello for 33 years, so her network is large, though she is always looking for new people to talk with about her favorite subject. Many of the Othello Food Bank’s successes can be attributed to Sharon’s indefatigable enthusiasm.

Othello is home to about 7,600 people and is the largest city in Adams County, which has a population density of 8 people per square mile. Despite the low population, the Othello Food Bank offered 23,754 services to people in 2014. Sharon is always looking for ways to get more fresh produce into the food bank. The reputation she’s helped build for Othello Food Bank, as an organization eager for community involvement, has led to many fruitful partnerships.

For example, a large international juicing company called SVZ Industrial Fruit and Vegetable Ingredients is located in Othello. A year ago Sharon had sent them a letter telling them about her work. She didn’t hear anything from them for many months, then in the spring SVZ’s human resources sent her an email asking how they could be involved. This has grown into a series of consistent donations of fresh produce to Othello Food Bank. In May 2015 SVZ donated almost 1000 pounds of organic apples, butternut squash, and carrots.

She doesn’t only work to get large donations; any amount is accepted. She has a connection with a berry grower, and whatever he doesn’t sell at the farmer’s market he gives to the food bank. The Othello
Food Bank has partnered with the Othello Community Gardens, and has several plots there. They also get produce donated from plots managed by the Lions Club, the Juvenile Alternative Detention Initiative, and individual community gardeners. Over a typical growing season the Food Bank gets around 2,000 pounds of produce donated from the community gardens.

I remarked to Sharon that it sounds like she has a long list of leads that she’s constantly juggling. “Beth, you have no idea!” she said. At the beginning of the season, she gives her card to all the members of her board and encourages them to hand out cards to their connections in the community. “I’m always on call and available to go pick things up,” she said.

The Othello Food Bank gets donations from several mostly large scale farmers in the Othello area. I asked Sharon how she made those connections with growers, and she emphasized the importance of getting the word out. She has made two presentations at her local Rotary club, and a grower approached her afterwards and told her that he has plenty of produce to donate and that she shouldn’t hesitate to call him. She’s taken the truck out to his farm and loaded it up with bins of onions and potatoes and apples. Another time, she found the number of another local grower and called him. He said, “I always wondered why Othello Food Bank didn’t call me.” She then went out to his farm to meet him, as she feels that face to face contact is important and she wants to be more than just a voice on the phone. Now she picks up produce at his farm once a week. Another grower is a member of Sharon’s church. One of the sons volunteers at the Food Bank. He brings in 50 pound bags of onions and really sees the connection — food he grows goes to feed hungry people.
Sharon has an eye for both the big picture and the small. When I asked what some of her successes were, she mentioned two food bank clients, Dawn and Alan, who are avid gardeners. They come to the food bank for food they can’t grow, and in return they donate cabbage, broccoli, peppers, and tomatoes from their gardens. Other food bank clients have donated cherries from their orchards. She said, “I consider one of our successes to be that people feel good about giving back.”

For more resources on starting a food bank-community garden collaboration, see Tacoma-Pierce County’s “Share the Harvest” Training Guide. Also see Rotary First Harvest’s Resource Guide.


For more information on making your food bank more visible in your community, see Northwest Harvest’s Growing Connections Resource Guide, especially Guide 2.


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