

# NW MONDAY

## NORTHWEST HARVEST'S FOOD FOR THOUGHT

**Tyrone Beason**

*Seattle Times staff columnist*

Food, whether in a home-cooked meal or at a favorite restaurant, can stir remarkably vivid memories.



But as I learned at a special dinner and conversation organized by the nonprofit Northwest Harvest last week at District 1 Saigon restaurant in Redmond, so does the idea of food scarcity.

I was one of about 20 guests at an event conceived by Northwest Harvest as an informal roundtable bringing together leaders and influencers interested in discussing food as a public-policy, health and civil-rights issue. District 1 Saigon owner and Asian-community activist Taylor Hoang co-presented the dinner, serving up a multicourse meal prepared on site, partly using items often found at food banks.

Whole-kernel corn, rice, black-eyed peas, green beans, stuffed zucchini, tofu, salmon, beef and shrimp, all done Vietnamese style with the intricate flavors and aromas of Southeast Asia. Though redolent of Vietnam, the meal transported me back home to Kentucky.

I remember the autumn day when I was a kid when my family got a knock on the door from volunteers handing out boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables to the needy — the first time I ever thought of our family that way. Then there were the many times I stood in line with my mother's mother to collect government cheese and peanut butter. I recalled my poor-kid shame, but also my hungry-boy relief, every time I presented my free-lunch card in the school cafeteria. There were free sack lunches in summer. There were the books of food stamps my mom would count out like play money to buy groceries.

My parents worked their tails off, often a couple of gigs each at meager wages, to make sure my two brothers and me got three meals a day. But it wasn't always enough. Food aid was our safety net.

I didn't see it then, but society, in the form of government programs and generous members of my hometown community, had looked out for my parents even as my folks did everything they could to make it on their own.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service defines "food insecurity" as "The limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way."

Appallingly for a wealthy state with a major agricultural sector, an estimated one in eight people in Washington — from food deserts in urban centers to middle-income and working-class suburbs to fertile rural areas — fall into that category.

Northwest Harvest wants to cut that rate in half over the next decade.

It is Washington's only statewide, nonprofit food-distribution system, serving 2 million meals a month through food banks and meal programs, as well as at schools with a high percentage of students needing food aid.

As part of that campaign, the organization is hosting the dinner conversations in partnership with local restaurants. Last week's event was the third installment.

"We believe anyone in need of food should be given food,

no questions asked," Northwest Harvest CEO Thomas Reynolds and District 1 Saigon's Hoang wrote in an Op-Ed in this paper last month. "All hungry people are already asked to make impossible choices that none of us would want to face: do I eat, or do I put money toward rent? Does my child eat lunch, or do I put the money toward my mother's cancer treatment?"

Reynolds and Hoang describe healthy food not as a perk for those who can access it but as a basic human right. I agree.

For lower-income immigrants, the choices stand to get even starker under the Trump administration, Reynolds and Hoang warn in their Op-Ed. As I've noted in recent columns, the administration wants to restrict legal immigrants' eligibility for green cards if they accessed federal aid programs such as Medicaid or food stamps.

There's no rationale for such a policy move other than pure cruelty. Trump and his White House advisers seem to be OK with forcing law-abiding immigrants to worry not just about the usual stresses that come with putting down roots in a new country, but whether they'll be able to feed their families while doing so.



GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

*Taylor Hoang, owner of District 1 Saigon in Redmond, served a multicourse meal made up in part of items often found at food banks.*

This issue hits home as much for Hoang as it does for me. She and her mother arrived here from Vietnam in 1982 when she was seven. Her dad came several years earlier. Her mom worked three jobs, including as a janitor at night, to put food on the table. The family worked hard to sustain itself without outside help, Hoang told us at last week's dinner, but they sometimes relied on food banks to help fill the pantry.

Hoang didn't think so much about what it meant back then, but now that she's in the food industry herself, she's grown passionate about the importance of easy access to nutritious — and culturally appropriate — food, especially for new immigrants and families from non-Western societies.

Food banks, government programs, nonprofit organizations and volunteers working to keep the most vulnerable members of this community fed are doing more than the good work of offering charity.

By combating hunger wherever it happens and in every community, in their own way they're fighting for justice.

Tyrone Beason: [tbeason@seattletimes.com](mailto:tbeason@seattletimes.com).

Tyrone Beason offers his perspective on the social-justice issues that define our times, reporting on the people, events and movements shaping our civic discourse. He previously wrote cover stories for the paper's Sunday magazine Pacific NW.