



www.thefoodpantry.org

talking with our volunteers

Over forty people volunteer each week to run the food pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Some are just visiting, some drop by occasionally, and some have been working with us for years. All of them make the food pantry into a community. This interview is with volunteer Mona Mejia.

I'm 30 now – though sometimes I feel 19, and sometimes 100. I grew up in San Francisco, the youngest of the family. We didn't have a lot of money, but my mom used to say she gave her kids BMWs: that's "Bart, Muni, and walk." We went everywhere. It was safe to play in the streets in the summertime, or ride around in the back of pickup trucks. I was a little tomboy: in fact before I got together with my husband, he remembers me hanging out the bus window as we went past the flower shop where he worked and flipping him off. I thought I was so tough.

When I was a teenager, I ran away from home. I regret a lot of stuff I went through, putting my mother through so much. I started to look at the people I was hanging out with and thinking, I don't want to be a bad girl. I want to make people proud.

I always wanted to work in hospitals. It's probably because I like to talk to people so much—I was voted



Volunteer Mona Mejia greets people at the pantry

“most talkative” in middle school and high school. I became a phlebotomist; blood doesn't scare me. I feel like I can be calm with people, and help them while they're going through a hard time.

My husband works for the city, and we have four kids—three of our own, and one adopted. I definitely want to adopt at least one more. When you take in foster kids, you see how much they need a home. I know how hard it is to live with parents who are on drugs or drinking, or who abuse you. My father died of alcoholic dementia.

I try not to be paranoid and nervous about my kids. I want them to be safe, but I want them to be streetwise. And I want them to learn how to help other people.

I came to the pantry the first time to help my sister get her groceries. I wasn't working then, so I got food too—it really came in handy. So I came back and asked if I could stay and help. Now the pantry's like my home away from home. Everyone has their own story. I love the volunteers: we're like that clique in high school, a tight group, even though we're all really different from each other. If I don't come I feel like I'm missing something.

We're providing a big service. When I work the front door I see a lot of familiar faces. I have my boyfriends (the

older men) and I give them a hug. When we say hi, and remember people, they light up—it's like they're seeing their best friend.

In ten years I'd guess I'd like to have a stable job, another kid, still be with my husband—just be happy and healthy. Yesterday the kids and I went out to the reservoir and fed the ducks—it was ordinary, walking out there together, the kind of thing I couldn't have imagined in my crazy wild teenage years, how beautiful that would be.

gleaning city food

The Food Pantry has begun working with a network of urban farmers to talk about ways we can provide the people who come to the pantry with super-fresh food, grown right here in the backyards, community gardens and sidewalks of our city. We've even found some urban beekeepers, inspiring St. Gregory's and the food pantry to set up hives in the churchyard.

Here in San Francisco, where fruit trees produce abundantly even in small backyards, and a growing number of families tend individual and community gardens, we're reviving gleaning as a way to build community.

Gleaning refers to the ancient practice of leaving some food in the fields for widows, orphans and the landless. (The Bible tells landowners "You shall not harvest all your fields and vines, or gather up all the fallen fruit, but leave it for the poor and the stranger.")

There are plenty of contemporary examples. The amazing Free Farm Stand www.freefarmstand.org connects people who bring extra food—and seedlings—every week to share with their neighbors, in a city park. Other community garden projects, like that of the Permaculture Guild 18thandrhodeisland.org, involve kids as well as adults in growing food to give away to hungry people.

This spring, people from the food pantry, local churches and community groups will be going door to door, scouting out neighbors with fruit trees who might welcome gleaners. We'll offer to pick the fruit (leaving whatever the owner wants to keep) and distribute the surplus to food pantries and free farm stands. Then our friends in the Permaculture Guild will help the owners with pruning and tree maintenance, so the trees will stay



People leave The Food Pantry with fresh vegetables and fruit

healthy and bearing. And we'll map every tree, building a picture of edible San Francisco block by block, so that we can see when fruit is ripening, and arrange for volunteer pickers.

If you're interested in being part of this work, please contact director Sara Miles (sara@thefoodpantry.org).



breaking bread together

Every Friday, we prepare “family meal” for our volunteers—as many as 45 people of all ages and backgrounds who show up to unload the groceries, set up the pantry, welcome visitors and give away food. It’s hard work, so we like to set a nice table to fortify everyone before we open the pantry.

Paul Fromberg, the rector of St. Gregory’s and a Food Pantry board member, has been one of our regular cooks for years. Paul learned the secrets of buttermilk biscuits and King Ranch chicken from his Texas grandmother, and mastered California cuisine when

he moved here. He’s known for baking homemade éclairs, banana pie with praline dust and crème anglaise, and crazily beautiful birthday cakes. You can always find Paul holding out a spoon. “Here,” he’ll say, “taste this.”

Elka Gilmore, a chef who trained in France and Asia, and whose namesake

San Francisco restaurant Elka earned her a national reputation, volunteers to cook family meal at the food pantry once a month. She dazzled volunteers recently with a monumental paella, and is known for her rich, long-simmered

“you get tired of cooking for people who aren’t hungry”

ragu. Elka, who volunteers with a number of food-oriented nonprofits, loves feeding people at the pantry. “In restaurant work,” she says, “you get tired of cooking for people who aren’t hungry.”

Natasha Morolwei is a student at the nearby California Culinary Academy, who works most Fridays making sure

everyone has enough to eat. She’s an inspired salad-maker, and her chili is a favorite with the volunteers. Although she’s training in classic French and new American cuisine, Tasha says her favorite lunch offering is “real food for real people.”

seasonal eating

Thanks to the San Francisco Food Bank and its network of farmers and growers, we give away literally tons of terrific fresh produce every week at the food pantry –much of it local. These cool spring months, we’ve had an abundance of citrus; plenty of potatoes, carrots, yams and sweet potatoes; pears and apples; cabbage, lettuce and greens of all kinds. Then there are the surprises: one week we got an entire pallet of red Belgian endive! And some of the organic growers supply vegetables like yellow, white, and Chiogga beets; artichokes; kohlrabi and turnips; rapini, mustard greens and wonderful mushrooms.

Soon the supply of grapefruits and oranges will diminish, as well as some of the cool-weather crops from the coastal farms...but we’re looking forward to spring, with asparagus and stone fruits!



The Food Bank truck makes a delivery to the pantry



eat, share, give

about the pantry



The Food Pantry's mission is to increase hungry people's access to food. We run our flagship pantry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, and offer training, small amounts of start-up money, and support to other pantries in the Bay Area (so far we've helped start 17!)

Every Friday we give away free groceries to all comers, as many as 650 hungry families. We provide literally tons of fresh fruits and vegetables, rice, beans, pasta, cereal, bread and more. The pantry is run entirely by volunteers—almost all of them people who came to get food and stayed to help out—and there are no requirements for receiving food. Everyone is welcome to receive and to give.

If you are interested in starting a food pantry in the Bay Area, please contact director Sara Miles (sara@thefoodpantry.org.) If you want to volunteer with us, come any Friday between 9AM-3PM.

The Food Pantry
500 De Haro Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
www.thefoodpantry.org

This quarter we want to give special thanks and a shout-out to our donors **Anthony Myint and Karen Liebowitz**, the culinary geniuses who run Mission Street Food, a wildly popular, unorthodox one-night-a-week restaurant that donates all of its profits to charity www.missionstreetfood.com. They chose The Food Pantry to receive the money one evening...and then another. "We visited The Food Pantry's distribution center last week and saw the amazing work they're doing," Karen wrote on their blog. "They have beautiful produce available for hungry people, and for every dollar in donations, they can feed a family." Then Anthony invited Food Pantry director Sara Miles and board member Paul Fromberg to serve as guest chefs for yet another benefit night, cooking locally gleaned and gathered food. Stay tuned for a report on our experiment!

The Food Pantry isn't supported by the church or government agencies, but is funded by donations from people like Anthony and Karen--and you. This year your gifts matter more than ever.

The cost of food is going up. Thanks to the San Francisco Food Bank, we get our fresh fruits and vegetables free. But rice and beans have doubled in cost, and cereal costs us 140% more than it did last year.

Altogether, we expect our food costs to keep rising as the economy worsens.

And we're also seeing more and more hungry people at the pantry. Most of our visitors continue to be elderly people, and low-wage workers with families. In 2008, we saw our numbers creep up. We were serving 400 people a week, then 450, then 500. This year, we're seeing upwards of 650 people every Friday, many of them newly unemployed, or simply unable to keep up with household expenses.

We want to feed them all. We still manage to be incredibly cost-efficient: **it costs us just one dollar a week to buy groceries for a family. Fifty dollars will help feed a family for a year.**

These are hard times: it's going to take all of us working together to overcome the current economic crisis. And in the meantime, we need to take care of each other, and make sure that our neighbors have enough to eat.

All donations are tax-deductible. Please use the enclosed envelope to mail us your gift. Or you can drop the envelope in the "donations" box by the front door at St. Gregory's. Or you can donate online: thefoodpantry.org/giving and ask your friends to contribute, too. Thank you.

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