

Behind-the-scenes food pantry supporter hopes to up its chilly game

By Brock Weir

In September 2011 a few loaves of Aurora-baked bread started a movement that has helped feed countless people across York Region.

Five years on from these humble beginnings, Lifecorps Food Share is looking to step up its game.

Lifecorps Food Share is one of 15 local charities partnering on this year's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International. As one of the 15 partners, they will get an equal share of the proceeds from York Region's biggest party, which runs September 16 and 17 at Magna's Aurora campus.

According to Alex Bilotta, Executive Director of Lifecorps, their share of the pot will go towards the purchase of a new five-tonne refrigerated truck to increase its capacity to deliver food to local food pantries and community organizations across all nine York Region municipalities.

The local chapter of Lifecorps, the food share program, started with a donation from Cobs Bread shortly after they opened at Bayview and Wellington. At the time, they were the sole agency that collected their end-of-day inventory. To this day, Cobs remains their largest donor, followed by Second Harvest, the Ontario Association of Food Banks, and Sobeys, among others.

The food collected is then distributed to food pantries and other organizations at the grassroots level.

"When a friend told me about Cobs Bread donation, I thought we could probably do something like that," says Mr. Bilotta, of finding a local project to work in conjunction with the broader mandate of Lifecorps International, which was founded in 2004 to carry out mission work in Guatemala. "I contacted the York Region Food Network who gave me some leads and then I sat down with the Executive Director who happened to mention allocations for York Region through the Ontario Association of Food Banks weren't getting to York Region because there wasn't an agency that had that capacity to take that responsibility on. I told her we were willing to help her and that is how we got started with food banks.

"We were overwhelmed. I had no idea York Region had food banks. I have been to Guatemala about a dozen times and experienced third world poverty and just never made the connection that Canada, such an affluent country, would even have food banks. It was a big surprise and a real learning experience. The learning curve was pretty big and it was certainly an education."

But, of course, there were some challenges in meeting this overwhelming need. The group was helped off the ground with a significant grant from Ontario's Trillium Fund. In their first funding proposal, they asked for a second truck to assist with deliveries in their second year of operations, which was denied.

"It had only taken me a few months to realise that the truck we purchased was too small and if I had known we desperately needed that second truck sooner than the second year I probably would have gone back to Trillium to protest a little bit," says Mr. Bilotta. "We serve community food pantries, homeless centres, women's centres, drug abuse programs, non-profit housing, outreach programs, community meals, seniors' programs, and we also provide cat food to the OSPCA for their feral cat program. We're having a problem meeting the demand. We definitely need a much larger truck to be able to collect and deliver a lot more food. We will be able to bring more food to our present agencies and then we will be able to take on other agencies that are presently on a waiting list.

"By helping Lifecorps Food Share, you're helping 50 organizations across York Region because that is who we serve. We serve organizations that provide for low and moderate income individuals. The other [Hoedown partners] are definitely worthy of being supported, but most of them serve a very small demographic. We serve a whole bunch of different organizations that provide for low and moderate income individuals. It is not just food banks."

For more information on Life Corps Food Share, visit foodshare.lifecorps.com. For more on Hoedown, and the 14 other community organizations benefiting from this year's bash, visit www.hoedown.ca.