

Agency for Change Podcast: Beth Ostdiek Smith, CEO, Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Everything you do helps you prepare for your next role.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Kelley Peterson:

Here's a surprising fact. Food makes up 17% of Nebraska's municipal waste stream. That means it's the third largest component of landfill waste in the state and it's the first in Omaha. Can you imagine if we were able to divert that food from the landfill by giving it to people who need it? That's exactly the idea behind Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue in Omaha.

Kelley Peterson:

Hi, everyone. This is Kelley Peterson, vice president, nonprofit creative director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change Podcast. Today, I'm talking with Beth Ostdiek Smith, the CEO, president and founder of Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue which helps connect hungry people with fresh food that would otherwise end up in the landfill. Beth, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you and your organization are making on the world.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

I'm excited to talk to you too and have this opportunity to share a little bit more about it.

Kelley Peterson:

How did you come up with the idea to start the Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue, and who does your organization help?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Okay, so I know it's a lot of words, but actually I saw a different organization down in Arizona that was doing something similar and I started asking around Omaha and no one was doing this. We have a great Food Bank, we have wonderful food pantries. That's another thing a lot of people get confused about, what's a food bank and what's a food pantry, but no one was capturing the excess food that is in our grocery stores, caterers, event centers, many places, so both fresh and prepared. So I just saw a niche that needed to be filled.

Kelley Peterson:

I want to take a minute to talk about you. Tell me about your career before you began the food rescue? How did your previous roles prepare you to handle your current role as CEO, president and founder?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

I believe everything kind of leads you to your next thing, but I had been in the travel industry. It's probably my first main career. That was over 25 years. I started out as a travel agent and I ended up working with a lot of VIP clients and also a lot of corporate accounts. And I was blessed to be able to take people around the world, learn about a lot of different cultures. Really enjoyed that opportunity. It was challenging as we had worked on commissions and rebates from airlines and then that went away. So then we had to go out to our corporate accounts that we shared those rebates and say, we're no longer able to give you that rebate, but we're now going to charge you for our services. So you better have pretty good services if you're going to do that.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So that was a challenge and we rallied through that. And this is a little before everyone was on computers, doing a lot of things. I guess, I'm aging myself. People had computers, but they didn't have as much of it out there for travel. And then we had 9/11 happen and we had people all over the world that were stuck and we were trying to get them back. The whole industry kind of changed. So between both of those things happening, we ended up shrinking our offices from four offices. I oversaw four offices between Omaha and Lincoln and down to one. And that was challenging, but it was good to try to get the team together. But then after a while, after a few years, I just didn't... I wasn't as excited about things, and it was like I was putting out more fires than being creative.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So I started to explore what else was out there. And I ran across this ad in the paper and it was for this winter circle program that worked with inner city elementary schools. Now, I hadn't been in a school a long time. My girls had been way out of school for a while, but I met the gentleman that was running that, Jerry Hoberman, and it was a goal setting rewards program that we'd take into the schools. So I was able to go into the corporations that I had been working with before and brought some of those people into the schools, because they knew all about setting goals. They became goal buddies in the schools. It was wonderful. I really enjoyed it. It was an eye-opening experience. A lot of the volunteers that came into schools learned just as much as those kiddos did with the program. Took it from four schools up to 12 schools. And in the meantime, also a merger with an organization that had programs for middle and high school, because this was elementary school that I worked with.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

And then we kind of went through a few bumps like any merger, but then it is still going on, name changes and so forth. But at one step of the process, I looked around the room and it was like, what doesn't fit in this picture? Remember that old game? And it was me. And it's, now what am I going to do? And so I remember this program down in Arizona that was happening. And once again, started to ask around, started to learn more. Took about two years. I just kind of was doing some research throughout the country in here before I decided to take that leap.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. What an inspiring story. One of the things that you said really rings true to me and you are just singing the music that I like to hear and that was the phrase that you said I was putting out more fires than being creative. And just seeing that in your path is super inspiring and being in a creative field find that so important to switch gears and you can be more creative when you're on a path of your passion. So good for you.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Thank you.

Kelley Peterson:

You talked too about, I automatically want to hear all about the travel and all the great places that you've been through the traveling experience, but maybe for a different podcast. But you did mention 9/11 and how that just shook everything as it did. I remember that time as well and was thinking hopefully we never have something like this again and then here we are with COVID-19. And though a very different event, it affected our worlds in a similar way. So after COVID-19 hit, what did it look like at the food rescue and in what ways did the pandemic change how you run the organization?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, of course we're in the food industry and capturing that excess food, so it really hit hard. The first few weeks in almost a month, everything was closing down. So we were getting calls from places that we never had before, including our current food donors, but the casinos, other caterers, everyone was closing their kitchens. So they were needing and wanting to donate if possible, which was encouraging, all their perishable food out of their freezers, their refrigerators, their pantries. So we were crazy trying to accommodate all that. So the one thing that's unique about Saving Grace is we are basically a distribution logistics operation. So whatever we capture, we have to find a home for it that day. We do not warehouse a thing.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So we're getting all of this coming in and people need food, but it was challenging to find places to take it and we had some great partners that had extra freezer space, big freezers and stuff that they could help store some of it because that's not what we do, and then we could go and help transport it later. That's what was so different. Then some of our regular food donors, some of the grocery stores, all the Kwik Shops, Kum & Go's, we still had some restaurants, still had some of those donations, but they dropped to 50% of what we had been getting. I sat in on a lot of different phone calls with a lot of different community leaders in education, in organizations that we help, all different types here in the community and I learned about these farm to family food boxes that were starting up from the USDA and so they were preparing these large produce boxes, working with different farmers.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

When everyone saw how much food was getting thrown out, it's always happened, but it came to a new reality. So when those different places signed up for those, they'd get a semi load a week. One of those was Miller Public Schools. A lot of the schools got them, but the ones that we ended up helping was Miller Public Schools, and then a nonprofit here in town, Juan Diego Center down with Catholic Charities. Great. They're getting these semi full every week of food boxes. It was way too much for them to handle. Well, that first summer with Miller Public Schools, they had a system on what schools they wanted to take it to, so we helped out. We had our distribution operation with our refrigerator trucks and our drivers of food handling license go and help pick up these boxes and dispense them out, along with our other food runs.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

And then still to this day, we are working with the boxes that are no longer with the USDA but other farmer boxes through the Catholic Charities. And we help distribute all of those. So our numbers are very

high, but we're still in the meantime trying to build up our original food donors as they're coming back on.

Kelley Peterson:

So when the food supply dropped cut that 50%, then how did you take care of those that were on your list?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

With those food boxes, but with those other foods, those food boxes, there was so much that was coming in, like I said, and we redistributed, and we still do so many of them that it took us over our normal amount of food that we were distributing. Now, as that goes away, we've been bringing back on old food donors and getting new food donors. And that's what we're really trying to change the culture a little bit about the food that is donated within our community. In fact, we don't say food waste. We say wasted food, because if it's edible, it needs to be donated.

Kelley Peterson:

That's a great flip of terms for sure that has great meaning and hats off for facing adversity and coming out on a very positive end and still are. That's just amazing. If you had to estimate how much food you have rescued and how many people you have helped through Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue, what would those numbers be?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

To be honest, we don't have to estimate how much food. We track how much food we capture from every location. We don't only track the poundage, we track the percentage of how much is produce, how much is dairy, how much is meats, how much are grains, and then we have miscellaneous because we do get some beautiful flowers from a couple of our grocery stores. So we are just under, since I started the organization, our first truck went out on September 30, 2013, we've captured just under seven million pounds of food and redistribute it. That's not purchasing any of it. It's good quality food that would've ended up in our landfills. And so we had always said that one pound of food was one meal. I know there're different configurations out there now. Let's just say that it's helped over six million people.

Kelley Peterson:

And when you get into numbers like that...

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Or six million meals. Why don't we say six million meals.

Kelley Peterson:

Six million meals. Yes. Wow.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

And it's good healthy stuff. We get done at CHI Health Center, when the swim trials were here, they did a beautiful, they've been partners for a long time, but they did beautiful healthy meals, individual meals, for each of the swimmers. Then they learn the swimmers do not want to eat before they swam. So here is all this great healthy food we came and picked it up and we got it dispensed out. So how many other

people? We take food to over 40 local nonprofits—pantries, shelters, after school programs, senior centers, even one world health, Ronald McDonald house. So if they're a nonprofit that are feeding our hungry, they can apply and it's free. And as long as we have more food donors, we could take it to more places. And then they can take all the resources that they would take, usually spend financially any of their efforts with their staffing to go and capture this food, to go and purchase this food. It helps their bottom line because we're helping to supplement that.

Kelley Peterson:

Truly. I'm not sure. Usually you say that's a win-win situation, but I think there's more than just two wins in that. There's a lot of wins.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

And our food donors, when you go in, you have to say why does this make good business sense? So I have five reasons why you should donate food. So one, it's a tax deduction. Two, it saves them on dumpster fees. Three, it should assist in their sustainability or green initiative and almost every business has as that, right? Four, it can be a great employee engagement. Anyone that has worked in the food industry has been sickened by how much food is thrown out and we can help with that by bringing the stories on how this is affecting other people. However, those organizations would like to bust or bring those stories, whether it's on their poster board, whether it's in their entryway, whatever. And then five, it's just a great community service. And we'd like to help promote and cross promote the organizations that are donating food.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. And you are 100% right about the sustainability initiatives and KidGlov is very interested in that as well. So this is right up our alley. So Beth, you're clearly passionate about environmental impact. What can people do at home to reduce their own food waste?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, there are quite a few things. One, we kind of work a lot with the food waste hierarchy or inverted food pyramid and one of the top parts on that, and let me just kind of whip through that real quick. So it's an upside down pyramid and the top widest biggest piece is reduce. So let's kind of think more about what we purchase. So we get a bigger home. I'm as guilty as a next person. We have more refrigerators, more freezers, bigger pantries, and what do we do? Fill them all and then we ended up throwing away so much. So that is probably our biggest factor is really trying to think through it and I'm as guilty as the next person.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So it's just trying to be more mindful with that. Then going down, the next one is feeding people. Next one would be feeding livestock. So it's getting narrower and narrower. The next one would be composting and renewable energy. And the last little pointed part of that inverted pyramid should be going into our landfill, because did you know that a head of lettuce can take up to 20 years to decompose in our landfill while sending off methane gas?

Kelley Peterson:

I had no idea.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

I know. I always thought you just sew it in there, but if it's not getting turned and all that in composting. So one, is reduce, kind of backing up. Another are the labels. They're so, it's like, oh, this is expired. It's best used by dates. And I tell you what has been a great marketing tool to get you to throw out all your good food and go buy some more. So let's get back a little bit to the taste and smell test. We're all pretty hardy here and no one wants to eat bad food or it doesn't have to be perfect looking. You can pick out some, if it's going into a soup or a stew or something like that, it doesn't have to be the best looking vegetable, right? It can be something not so much.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

And then composting it if you have all that extra. So making sure you're then trying to compost what comes after that. So those are some three big major ways that I think everyone can make a difference. Hey, and one other thing, not only at home, but they can be big impact, any food purveyor you go to, ask them what they're doing with their excess food. If they say they cannot donate it, that it's illegal, that is not true. There's the bill Emerson, Good Samaritan act. And no one has ever been sued for donating food.

Kelley Peterson:

I am learning so much through this so thank you for that. And those opportunities of you just don't get to learn something new every day, but I do believe you learn every day, but this has me full up. And so the whole concept of an inverted food pyramid, love that. And then also, oh, that's so great. Even when you're describing it for our listeners, just you can envision a pyramid and you filled it in so nicely and I understand it. And I also understand the pressures and yes, I do love marketing communications, but whoever invented the best used by, you are so right. So I for one am going to do a better job at going back to the taste and smell test for sure. Thank you for those new things, Beth. So it's obvious you've made a difference in Omaha. Do you have any advice for someone who wants to make a difference in their own community, whether they want to focus on helping feed the hungry or something else?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, advice is always easy to give, but I think part of it is just living, knowing what you're passionate about, get involved with those things that you're passionate about, use your talents. We're learning every day, right? Your talents, your skills, your passions, your connections. See if there's a niche out there that's not being filled and fill it and get good people around you. That's one of the best things I ever did was get good people around me that believe in this and all the things that my weaknesses that aren't great. I have the vision, the passion. I have a lot of experience just for being on this earth a little longer, but also getting people around you that really fill in your gaps.

Kelley Peterson:

That's great advice. So going into the future and maybe 10 to 15 years down the road, what's next for Saving Grace?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, I want to start a little bit now. I think I alluded to a little bit earlier. I'm really thrilled with how much our community has picked up on food donations. I do believe as I've gotten involved in this, as I keep learning, I'm like, oh, I didn't know that. I didn't know that. So how do I put it out there without getting preachy? I just think most people believe that you should feed bellies rather than landfills. And so just

doing a big campaign out there to change the culture of food that's wasted, and then where we have almost every food purveyor out there, it is just a natural thing for them to call and have it donated and, or I work a lot with our friends with the composting that it would be composted. I do have a kind of an interesting thing that I was thinking because composting, which is great and needed because we don't haul trash, right?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

But it hit me that people are paying to have their food composted, but when we go out to get food it's donated and we have to beg for people to donate for food free. Free, when it's to feed people. I think that's a cultural change I'm looking to make in the next, sooner than 10, 15 years. What I see for Omaha, Lincoln, our surrounding area and hopefully throughout, that again, it will be just a standard way of working.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So it doesn't have to always be our trucks coming out unless it's huge loads because they come like to come out for, I'll say 20 servings or more, but a lot of cities do have where you have an app and we have volunteers. We have people wanting to volunteer all the time. We don't have the opportunity yet. Once we get our community really rocking and rolling with this, we can have a lot of volunteers going and picking up smaller things and getting it organized. That's a whole nother piece that we need to have happen, where can be some people on their cars and their bikes for some smaller items. And then with our trucks, for the larger donations.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, I haven't heard one time today, anything that sounded preachy, but I liked that you used that term. And I just want to say if you can sell me on the story about lettuce in a short period of time, amongst many other things that you've already shared with listeners today. Wow. I think that you can make it happen for sure.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Visuals are good. So I'm going to get some visuals out in the community.

Kelley Peterson:

Yes.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

So I think, ugh, just looking at that food, good healthy food out in the landfill, it's pretty sickening when you have hungry people. If nothing else during that pandemic look at what we've learned.

Kelley Peterson:

An amazing picture to look at that would change minds for sure because visuals do often speak thousands of words. That sounds like a good idea. Speaking of visuals. Visuals oftentimes do include those words and I'm inspired by motivational quotes. Could you give our listeners a few of your own words of wisdom?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Wow. I've picked up so many around that I would love to share, but I don't want to take a couple of them that I use. I think I even alluded to it earlier that everything you do helps you prepare for your next role and a big one is knowing is responsibility. Once you know something, then you feel responsible to take action. That's what we hope.

Kelley Peterson:

Those are both great and inspiring. And another one that I have written down, I'm writing as fast as I can as we talk, but just the mantra of feed bellies versus landfills is a great one.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

That's what I have at the bottom of my emails and kind of came up with that early on. Yes. Thank you.

Kelley Peterson:

All inspiring. So Beth, for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and how to support you, how can they find out more about Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, we do have a website and of course we're on all the social medias, but it's savinggracefoodrescue.org. You can just Google Saving Grace, but put "food" or "Omaha," otherwise you'll get all the lovely animal rescues, right? And I named it Saving Grace because I feel like grace could be the food on your table, the face of the elderly or a face of a child.

Kelley Peterson:

For sure. Lots of graces out there. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

Well, I think in this day and age right now with everything going on, especially in the last few years, I myself and I have a feeling most people that I talk to feel a little bit out of control. There're many things happening we have no control over. And I do feel like that whether you're concerned with hungry people, people not getting enough nutrition, because we do believe people should have a right to healthy food and our environment, all that's happening with our environment. Here are some simple ways to affect those things that you can do at home or in our community is trying to keep this good healthy food out of our landfill and helping give nutrition to people that need it.

Kelley Peterson:

Seems simple and bright in these times.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

We can all do something.

Kelley Peterson:

We all can. Beth, I fully believe that the world needs more change makers like you. Thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

I appreciate the opportunity. Go out and do some great things and enjoy the ride.

Kelley Peterson:

Thanks so much. It was a pleasure.

Beth Ostdiek Smith:

You, too. Bye, bye.

Announcer:

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