

Agency for Change Podcast: Brian Barks, President & CEO, Food Bank for the Heartland

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Brian Barks:

Big faith, family first, others-centered, and integrity always win the day.

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.

Lyn Wineman:

Here's an astounding fact, one in nine people face food insecurity today. And what's worse, one in six of those people is a child. That means you likely know someone in your day-to-day life that is struggling to put food on the table. In a moment, you're going to hear from someone who leads an organization right here in the Midwest that is helping to connect those individuals to food resources near them. And that's, of course, the Food Bank for the Heartland.

Lyn Wineman:

But before we kick off our interview, I want to take a moment to recognize the serious need the food bank is facing right now. And to tell you that you, yes, you listening right now, can do something to address food insecurity. Stay tuned because you're going to find out exactly what you can do to help and what to do as soon as you finish listening to this episode today.

Lyn Wineman:

So let's kick this off. Hey everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Brian Barks, president and CEO of Food Bank for the Heartland, which partners with organizations throughout Nebraska and Iowa to distribute food to families, seniors, children, veterans and others in need of food assistance. Brian, welcome to the podcast.

Brian Barks:

Lyn, thank you. Appreciate it. Thank you so much for having me. I love it. Love it, love it.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm so glad to talk to you today and I know there's such a need for what you do. And I can't imagine that there are very many people who have not heard of your organization, but for those out there who haven't, could you just describe the work of Food Bank for the Heartland?

Brian Barks:

Sure. Food Bank for the Heartland partners with almost 600 different organizations ranging from brick-and-mortar pantries to emergency shelters to after school programs, schools, etc. We distribute food to those organizations who then distribute to families, individuals, parents, seniors, veterans that need food assistance. We do that in 77 counties of Nebraska and 16 in western Iowa.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my goodness, you have really an expansive footprint then. One thing I love about talking with nonprofit leaders is how you all coordinate with one another. It's not a competitive situation, but you really collaborate for the good of the people that you serve.

Brian Barks:

Yeah. It's something that we have to do. One of the positives, if we can find any positives that were brought on by COVID, is that it forced relationships, it forced partnerships and it accelerated them really, really quickly. Where we were partnering with organizations that we may not have or may not have as quickly as we did. We found new ways of working together that I think is really a benefit and a positive of the nonprofit industry. That certainly does not take place on the for-profit level.

Lyn Wineman:

For sure Brian, I appreciate you saying that. There's another thing I want to bring up here because I'm guessing just after this first question, people have noticed the richness of your voice. I understand you had a career in radio as a reporter, as an anchor, as a news director. I'm curious what led you from that career into your current role as president and CEO of Food Bank for the Heartland?

Brian Barks:

I would say a little bit of luck in the good Lord. I spent 22 years of my life on the radio doing news in one form or fashion. It's what I went to college to do, it's what I wanted to do. And then in Thanksgiving week of 2008, I was told my contract wasn't going to be renewed. I'd never lost my job before and at that point in time, I figured, you know what, there's something else that I need to do. I need to find something different. So, at that point I spent five months looking for work and landed at the Food Bank as a guy raising money and doing communications work. And the more you work at an organization like ours, I mean let's face it, the mission work that we do here at the food bank speaks for itself.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Brian Barks:

But what really, I guess, sucks you in here is the people. I have been truly, truly blessed to work with some unbelievable, passionate, compassionate people who are pulling on the same side of the rope together, working towards the same common goal, wanting to make their community a better place to live, wanting to make an impact and to change lives. This is the work that we do at the Food Bank. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that there would be something that I would love more than what I did in my previous life while I was in it doing radio. But I have found it here at the Food Bank, it is an absolute honor and a privilege to serve as the CEO of this organization, because we have so many rich

and talented people here who have a breadth of experience that makes our organization what it is today. I'm just so proud to be the leader of the folks here, they make people like me look good.

Lyn Wineman:

Brian, since this is just audio people won't be able to see your face, but I can see your face at this moment while we're recording, and I can see the pride in your expression. I think as a leader, there's very few things that are better than working with a team of people that are just passionate and fired up about what they do, and I think that's fantastic. I can't imagine a better cause for that. So one more question for you just in follow up with that great news career that you've had, do the communications and storytelling skills transfer over to the work that you're doing today?

Brian Barks:

Very much so. I will never ever forget that when I lost my job, I didn't know what in the world I would do next. I felt at the time that I had no real appreciable skills, I'm not somebody that can build something with my hands. What I spent my lifetime doing was writing, speaking into a microphone and talking to people. I just thought what can I do, I mean, what in the world can I do? And it didn't take long for me to realize that the skills that I had developed over the years on the radio, certainly, most definitely transcend into what I am doing today. Yeah. What I am doing today is telling the story of those folks who need assistance, need food assistance for one reason or another. I'm telling the story of our organization and how we play and helping. One of the best parts of my job is when I'm able to sit down with somebody who has capacity to make a difference and when I'm able to marry our need and their capacity and their desire to help. When I can do that is the greatest feeling that I can possibly have in my job.

Lyn Wineman:

Ah, that's wonderful.

Brian Barks:

So using those skills certainly does apply.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great. I too went to journalism school, and I think just the learning of how to ask questions and summarized data and share back in a concise way and compelling, maybe even more important, is really helpful to a lot of different professions. I think there's a lot of people with journalism that have ended up in the nonprofit sector for that reason. So, as you're in the storytelling mode, I'm curious, are there misconceptions about the Food Bank of the Heartland that have to be turned around in any way?

Brian Barks:

Yeah, there's several. One of which is, I think a lot of people believe that while we are based in Omaha, that we just served the Omaha Metropolitan area. Our mission field is a lot larger than that. It's 93 total counties, as I mentioned of Nebraska and western Iowa. We serve 77 of Nebraska's 93 counties. There's a wonderful food bank in Lincoln, the Food Bank of Lincoln that serves 16 counties in southeast Nebraska. They do a great job. We do a lot with them. But we do the bulk of Nebraska. And then in western Iowa, if you go up and down the Missouri River, go about two counties to the east and go up and down the Missouri River that is a territory that belongs to us as well. So our mission field is really, really large. And as you would imagine, comes with a lot of challenges, a lot of logistical challenges.

Brian Barks:

Another common perception is that the Food Bank is a place where, I've lost my job, I need some help. I'll go to the Food Bank and I'll pick up a couple sacks of groceries and I'm on my way. The Food Bank is not set up like that. We are set up to acquire, whether it's through donations or food purchasing that we do here or through food that we receive from the US Department of Agriculture, we collect that food and then distribute it out through a network of pantries who do what they do best, which is to serve the client on the individual basis. The way the food banking model is set up is that there should be one place that has all the expensive stuff like big trucks, big forklifts, big racking, huge refrigeration. That's us, that's what we have. And then we distribute out to the pantry level. Those are two of the biggest misconceptions that are out there about what Food Bank for the Heartland is about.

Lyn Wineman:

Brian, I'm glad that you cleared those things up because I have to admit, I've been aware of Food Bank of the Heartland for a very long time and probably was not aware of the full extent of either of those things, but both make a lot of sense. But 93 counties, that's a lot of kids and families that you serve. I think that's just great. I think it's great.

Lyn Wineman:

So we talked a little bit about the pandemic and how some good things came out of the pandemic. I understand one of the services you were able to deploy during the pandemic was a mobile food pantry. Can you talk to me a little bit more about the mobile unit and some of the advantages of being able to travel directly to communities in need?

Brian Barks:

Yeah. Mobile pantry is a tool in our arsenal that we've been using well before the pandemic. It is a tool that we use that is aimed largely at rural communities where the need for food assistance is high, but access is low. Where there may not be that brick-and-mortar pantry that serves a community.

Brian Barks:

So, what we do is we partner with a local group within the community, whether it's a church group, a school group or a business group or whatnot. And then we bring out a truckload of food and the food items on a mobile pantry can vary anywhere from fresh to frozen to dairy to bakery to canned goods, dry goods virtually everything you can think of. And then the partner that we have provides the volunteers, and then we bring the food and then it is distributed directly to members of the community.

Brian Barks:

Now, as I mentioned, it is mostly targeted towards rural communities. We do somewhere between 40 to 45 different mobile pantries every single month, again most of them in rural communities. And it is not unusual for a mobile pantry in a rural community to be attended by clients who are coming from two, three, four, five counties away. Not unusual for that to happen.

Lyn Wineman:

Right. I think when you live in those areas you become used to driving, but wow, that also just really puts an exclamation point on the need for what you're doing. I want to keep talking about the pandemic for a moment, because first off, I want to recognize the great work the Food Bank continues to do and has

done to help people. And second, I'd like to ask about the demand your organization saw during that time. Have you ever seen a heightened need like that?

Brian Barks:

Never. Not even close. Yeah. I started at the Food Bank shortly after the Great Recession and we saw the amount of need go really, really high at that point in time. But what we saw in 2020 and 2021 was something that, certainly not during my time, and I hope we'd never see it again. What made it particularly challenging at that particular time was that the numbers were pretty consistent here locally, but across the country as well, was that one in four people who were seeking food assistance at the time were doing so for the very first time. That they had never sought food assistance before. And being able to manage and understand how you go about getting food assistance, it's not real easy. I mean, it's different from community to community. I mean, it's different here in Omaha than it is in Chadron. There's more here available at Omaha than there is in Chadron or whatever.

Brian Barks:

So, that made it challenging and just the amount of need. But on the flip side, what we saw was the amount of generosity that came with it. I have never, in my wildest dreams, ever thought I would see the amount of generosity that flowed through our organization, whether it was the giving of time or treasure or food contributions. That we were able to respond to the skyrocketing need in a manner that we were able to only because we were given the opportunity to do so because of the generosity of our community. While we see the heartbreak of our community, every day we see what is the very best of our community and what makes Omaha, the Midwest, Nebraska, Iowa, one of the greatest places on earth to live.

Lyn Wineman:

Here, here, I'll second that. Such generous people during such a scary and unpredictable time of need. It was great to see.

Lyn Wineman:

So, Brian, I am curious so now today, I mean, we're still struggling with the pandemic, yet I think we're learning to live with the pandemic, but as a follow up, what does demand for your services look like today? Has it gone down at all? Is it going back up at all? I'm just really curious about that.

Brian Barks:

Yeah. That's a really good question Lyn, and unfortunately what we're seeing is believe it or not, the need is actually rising. The obvious question would be why, inflation has a lot to do with it. It, inflation is a double-edged sword for us. It is purchasing food for those struggling with tight budgets has become more challenging. We all have seen what has happened with food prices at the grocery store. We both certainly have seen what has happened with gas prices at the pump. You combine those with a family that's struggling to make ends meet, it makes it very, very difficult.

Brian Barks:

I was just looking at some data earlier this week. During the pandemic, we were serving on average somewhere in the vicinity of about 38,000 households each and every month. In the last fiscal years of ours, which will be the last 11 months, we've been averaging about 38,000 households with the last two months has been 40,000 plus.

Lyn Wineman:

So the need is increasing?

Brian Barks:

Yes. And unfortunately, what we've also been seeing is the availability of food that is flowing through our warehouse is dropping-

Lyn Wineman:

Brian, I didn't think about that. We think about what's happening at grocery stores and so forth, but that's got to impact you in a very big way.

Brian Barks:

Absolutely it does. So, what happens to us mirrors what you see in the grocery store. We're starting to see shelves a little emptier than they usually are, supply chain issue or what have you, that's impacting us too. The amount of food that we have been receiving from the United States Department of Agriculture is down 30% compared to a year ago. During our previous fiscal year, we were distributing enough food for roughly 2.6 million meals each and every month, this fiscal year we're distributing about 1.9 million meals worth of food. So again, we're dealing with less food, a little higher demand, and so it makes it very, very challenging.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. The math on that doesn't really work out so good, does it?

Brian Barks:

Sure. And throw inflation in the mix and you have what we have.

Lyn Wineman:

So Brian, we've talked about a lot of concerns, but looking into the future, what would you say is your biggest concern at the Food Bank?

Brian Barks:

I say this a lot and I mean it with all my heart. Since I've been here at the Food Bank I've seen our dollars rise and dip, and I've seen our food rise and dip, but at the end of the day for whatever reason, the food bank always comes out. My number one concern is not food and it's not money. It is the people here that we have in the organization. Our organization has been running pretty white hot for the last two years, and the last thing that I want is for somebody within our organization or however many number of people to throw up their hands and say, I can't do this anymore. I've had enough. I can't do it anymore. One of the things that I really stress is to have a proper work life balance. That at our organization, we cannot solve the hunger problem today.

Brian Barks:

We can solve it for somebody today and we'll solve it for somebody else tomorrow and the next day and the next day. But we're trying to solve a problem that's been around for over 2,000 years and we have to be okay as hard as it is for people in our industry to accept the fact that we're not going to solve our problem today or tomorrow. But we get the opportunity to come back and do it again tomorrow. But

that doesn't mean we should be working 10, 12, 14, 18 hours a day and putting our family second. Family is always first here at the food bank. I want to make sure that people are coming to work ready, willing, and able to do the very best that they can.

Brian Barks:

Each and every one of us brings certain amount of baggage to work every single day and I want people to be cognizant of that and to be realistic with one another. We got to a point where we were treating everything as a priority. And I believe that if you're treating everything as a priority, you have no priorities. So, we had to have some really difficult conversations about what are some of the things that we are not going to do anymore. That's hard. It's really, really hard.

Lyn Wineman:

It is hard. It's hard to say no.

Brian Barks:

Yeah. It's really hard to say no when you're in the nonprofit industry. It's hard to say no. But it was the best thing to do for the long-term interest of our organization and the people who work here. Because when you burn the candle at both ends, it doesn't end well.

Lyn Wineman:

Brian, that is the-

Brian Barks:

But that's my biggest concern.

Lyn Wineman:

That is the sign of a great leader and a great team, taking care of the wellness of your people and not just your people but their families. Each of those people goes home at night, hopefully they go home at night, to a family and that family is very impacted by their stress level, if they're burnt out, if they're feeling mentally, physically healthy or not. So, that is just such a great thing to say. I want to applaud you for that.

Lyn Wineman:

Brian, I'm going to switch gears a bit. I want to talk about Strike Out Hunger. I hear it's your 15th year running this event, KidGlov's very proud to be a participant and do our part, but can you describe what it is and how it's evolved over the years? And lastly, let's not forget to tell people how they can participate.

Brian Barks:

Sure. Strike Out Hunger is a month-long food, funds and volunteer drive. It's a friendly competition among metro area businesses to basically see who can generate the most meals. We calculate the donations of food, funds and volunteer time into meals. And so it's an awesome opportunity for businesses to get together to rally around a cause, maybe be a little bit competitive, but also make a little difference. Also, get involved to do some team building activities all for the betterment of making our community a better place. And so, Strike Out Hunger is a great tool to do that. And we are very thankful for the nearly 30 local businesses that have signed up this year.

Brian Barks:

Strike Out Hunger began 15 years ago as a small group project from Leadership Omaha 15 years ago. It started as just a small food drive among downtown Omaha area law firms, and it has since grown up into a major fundraising, food raising and volunteer raising effort for our food bank, where we're generating millions of meals each and every year. So, I'm really proud of the work that has happened to make this event grow. And the way people can go can get involved is, if you're not involved this year, get involved next year, get your company involved next year, just reach out to us at info@Foodbankheartland.org, and send us an email and say, "hey, send me some information about Strike Out Hunger." It's a great way to get your company involved, do some team building activities. I'm telling you, when you come in here and volunteer as a group; A, we'll put you to work, but B, you will leave here feeling like you've made a difference and that you put in a good day's work in just a matter of a couple hours.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm going to say the KidGlov team, we have our competitive juices flowing on this and our team who attended your kickoff event was all very, very motivated by your story. So we are looking forward to being a participant in that.

Lyn Wineman:

So, Brian, I want to ask you another question. I'm going to put your storytelling skills to use again. Everybody listens to the podcast knows this is my favorite question because I am inspired by motivational quotes, could you give us a few of your own original words of wisdom?

Brian Barks:

I really don't have much to offer in that arena. I will tell you though, the one thing that I do have sitting by my desk that I do look at is a couple years ago, I was in a workshop training where we had to create our own personal mission statement.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh great.

Brian Barks:

Yeah. I was that guy sitting in the back of the room saying, okay, this is really stupid. I don't understand why I need to do this. But then after it was explained to me and so when I meet with new employees here, look, I tell them my personal mission statement, so they understand what I'm about. And my personal mission statement is "big faith, family first, others-centered and integrity always win the day." That's what I stand for. That's what I want this organization to stand for as well. There are certain things that I will not compromise on, and those on that list I will not compromise.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. I talked to so many great leaders who start this humbly saying, I don't know if I have anything to say, and then they roll off something amazing like what you just shared. So thank you so much for sharing that Brian. It's a great personal mission statement.

Lyn Wineman:

So, for our listeners who would like to learn more about Food Bank for the Heartland, where can they go for more information?

Brian Barks:

I beg and plead you to go to Foodbankheartland.org. That is our website that is chocked full of all kinds of information. You can check out the website to learn about the issue of food insecurity that we have in Nebraska and Western Iowa. You can check out opportunities to volunteer. And if you are so motivated and inspired to do so, you can sign up right online and you can do it at a time that is convenient for you, then you can see exactly what shifts are available and how many people we need for that shift. If you feel so motivated as to make a difference by the contribution of your treasure, you can make a financial contribution right online. We, now more than ever, need the continued support of our community financially in order to keep our operations moving and to serve our neighbors. As we know, the pandemic greatly impacted our communities. In the Great Recession it took 10 years for the number of people who are food insecure to drop to pre great recession levels. We anticipate that will happen again.

Brian Barks:

The pandemic will soon turn into endemic, and it'll be rear view mirror stuff, hopefully sooner rather than later. But when it is, we will still be at work serving from the aftermath of what it left behind. People who were impacted by the pandemic were largely lower wage earners who dug themselves in a hole and it makes it really difficult to get out. It takes years to get out. And so the financial contributions that you make will greatly assist us in purchasing food, whether it is the actual purchase of food or whether it helps us fill our tank. By the way, it costs us now \$1,000 to fill up a semi to drive it across the state. So, we greatly need financial contributions to keep this operation moving.

Lyn Wineman:

All right, everyone who's listening, we said this at the top of the podcast, but this is your chance to help out. And we'll make sure that website address, if you didn't catch, will be in the show notes on the website. This is a great time to think about the Food Bank of the Heartland and help out people in need.

Lyn Wineman:

So, Brian, I've really enjoyed this conversation, even though we've talked about some very hard realities that we're faced with today. As we wrap up this time together, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Brian Barks:

We are lucky to be doing it. We are lucky to be blessed. We are blessed to be doing the work that we're doing because we know our community has our back. We saw it during the pandemic. We saw it actually during the great recession too, that we were able to respond as a Food Bank in the great need that we had then. And we saw it again in the pandemic. We know that the community has our back, and that's a great feeling. We love the work that we are doing, and we'd love to have you join us in it.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, that's great. Brian, my new friend, I fully believe the world needs more people like you and more organizations like Food Bank of the Heartland. Thank you for taking time to talk with me today.

Brian Barks:

You're very kind, Lyn. Thank you.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.