

The origins of the Good Food Box program

In 1991, the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) hired Mary Lou Morgan and Ursula Lipski to carry out a feasibility study to develop a project that would bring together farmers and inner city dwellers. The Toronto Food Policy Council is a citizen sub-committee of the Toronto Board of Health, made up of representatives from different sectors, including farmers, anti-hunger activists and representatives from the food industry. They believed that there were flaws in the way that the local food system connected city buyers with rural farmers. The complex nature of the economic relationship meant that low-income people in the city could go hungry while food rotted in the fields. There was also a huge gap in understanding between the farmer and the city-dweller. The average citizen in downtown Toronto had little idea what foods were in season or whether or not there had been a flood or drought. They were also unaware of the type of pressures being exerted on Canadian farmers, including the globalization of agriculture, corporate concentration and suburban land-use patterns. Many farmers were deeply moved by urban hunger and wanted to do something about it. The idea of more direct farm to consumer marketing, which later became known as Field to Table, was first conceived by Nan Hudson and farmers Jeff Wilson, and Terry Daynard. They wanted to create a practical way of helping solve some of the problems faced by farmers and low-income people with inadequate food access.

Mary Lou had worked in many sectors of the food industry—from running her own market garden, to food wholesaling and co-founding the successful Toronto worker co-op natural food store, The Big Carrot. Ursula's background was in the community sector as an anti-poverty and food access activist. The TFPC hired both of them for the direct farm to consumer project, bringing together their business, community development and alternative food systems knowledge. With money from their budget and from a United Church project, the two women carried out a detailed feasibility study, involving discussions with community agencies, potential customers of the project and Ontario farm organizations.

Mary Lou and Ursula read notes from a trip that Rod MacRae and several other public health colleagues had taken to Sao Paulo, Brazil, the year earlier. The PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores or The Workers' Party of Brazil), then in power at the municipal level in Sao Paulo, had implemented a wide range of innovative subsidized food programs including Sacalao markets, which provided high quality produce at half their retail cost in low-income neighbourhoods. The Brazilian model influenced the Field to Table travelling food truck that was at the centre of Mary Lou and Ursula's feasibility study.



The feasibility study showed that Field to Table was a viable option. Given the TFPC's catalytic and facilitating role in project development, it made sense for a community agency to take on the role of overseeing day-to-day implementation. The FoodShare Board invited the Field to Table project to operate under the auspices of FoodShare, and following extensive discussion of the structure of such an arrangement, FoodShare took over day-to-day operations, with an advisory committee chaired by a TFPC member to provide overall direction. FoodShare participated in setting the direction of the project, paid the two salaries and offered the necessary infrastructure of office and accounting.

At about the same time, Debbie Field became the Executive Director of FoodShare Toronto. Debbie had a background in community activism, as well as a history in municipal politics. Her political connections have subsequently helped FoodShare to obtain valuable political and in-kind support from the City of Toronto.

Poverty, emergency relief and the search for alternatives

FoodShare had originally been set up by former Toronto Mayor Art Eggleton in 1985 as a response to the recession of the early 1980's and the resulting rise in food bank use. The mandate had initially been "to end hunger in Metro Toronto" and activities centered on solving the hunger crisis through advocacy for better welfare rates and a higher minimum wage. The volunteer-run Hunger Hotline, a food bank referral service, was set up to dispense emergency food advice. But as time went on and food banks became a fixture, there was a realization that social justice would not be achieved quickly enough to deal with the problem of hunger. Lack of income might be the most important factor in causing hunger, but it was not the single cause of food insecurity.

In the late 80's and early 90's, FoodShare began to develop programs based on the long term food security model rather than on the emergency food relief model. There were community kitchens, community gardens and buying clubs, all modeled on similar programs in the developing world and geared toward ensuring that people had dignified access to healthy food at all times. These projects looked to long-term solutions, but their impact on people's short-term household food security was limited. The major difficulty was getting large numbers of people to buy into the challenging notion of collective action. When the Field to Table project began, the FoodShare board and staff saw the project as a direct and practical way to help improve individual families' short-term household food security problems, while also working on the longer-term goal of building a healthier, people-based food system.

It is not the belief or intention of FoodShare that progressive food programs can replace emergency aid programs in the short term (or at least, not without a massive



infusion of community and institutional support); nor can they replace welfare reform or the need for a more equitable socioeconomic system. So FoodShare has continued to maintain the Hunger Hotline (now called FoodLink) and to work on advocacy through alliances with organizations that work towards eradicating poverty.

Markets, buying clubs – and a new idea

The first produce distribution project established by FoodShare and the Field to Table project was a travelling community market. Mary Lou and Ursula ran 20 markets per week out of a truck, all in low-income neighbourhoods, many in the parking lots of social housing buildings in the northern parts of Toronto, where food access was a problem and grocery stores were few and far between. In the winter some of the host buildings asked that staff create a market in the lobby of the low-income building. We also supplied pre-order buying clubs and school food programs with fresh fruit and vegetables.

The flaws in the market and buying clubs projects soon became apparent. The community markets were very labour intensive, expensive to run and as a result, difficult to offer on any large scale. The buying clubs also required a lot of labour, in this case from the volunteers who ran them. They had to put together complicated orders, divide up cases between participants, organize pre-payment and worry whether participants were actually saving money, compared to buying “specials” at the supermarket. Buyers would sometimes be shocked to discover that the bananas they had bought through their buying club turned out to be more expensive than those offered at their local supermarket. What participants learned is that grocery stores use “loss leaders” (below cost prices) on fresh produce, to lure in customers. Another problem with the buying clubs was that cases were only sold in full, and often this was more than a community could use or afford.

FoodShare staff became committed to evaluating the impact that the project was having on the community. They soon began to feel frustrated at the limitations they were discovering. But their experience with markets and buying clubs had given them the benefit of learning firsthand about some of the ways in which poverty affects food security. FoodShare observed the cycle of dwindling funds and food from mid-month to month-end for people on welfare; and the demoralization caused by having to rely on food banks. For low-income people, food was often not a source of pleasure and comfort, but of worry and stress.

In the meantime, staff had heard about a California-based program called “Share”, which was running in 22 states and serving over 11 million low-income people. They began to consider the possibilities this model suggested. Share would help new towns and cities set up a “franchise” of their program. The disadvantages of becoming a franchisee to Share were that groups had to buy all produce through them (i.e. mostly

U.S. grown produce) and they took a dollar per box themselves to cover overhead costs. The selection of the food in the box was also based on an attempt to provide the materials for whole meals, and often included meat and processed foods. FoodShare decided to make some changes in the operation of the travelling food truck. They would focus on local, fresh and unprocessed foods for both nutrition and environmental reasons and also because meat is more expensive in Canada and requires strict temperature control. They would call their program the “Good Food Box”.

In February of 1994, the first 40 Good Food Boxes were packed by staff in the boardroom of FoodShare. It took an entire day to assemble the boxes! As the project has grown, observation, experience and formal evaluation have contributed to the evolution of some fundamental principles on which the Good Food Box is based. Yet the basic system remains: people pre-pay between \$12 and \$32 to their coordinator and then one week later receive a box of fresh fruit and vegetables at a lower price than if they were to purchase them at the supermarket. The box is delivered to pre-arranged community drop-off points. Volunteers, who live within the community, receive the produce at these drop-off points, and also co-ordinate money collection and organize the orders.

The Good Food Box helps other FoodShare programs grow

The Good Food Box has also developed a number of spin-off projects, including the Focus on Food Youth program, the Fresh Produce program for schools and agencies, Field to Table Catering, the Toronto Kitchen Incubator, and most recently the Good Food Markets, which are a version of the previous produce markets that operated in the early years of the Field to Table project.

Today in 2008, as we publish this second edition of the Good Food Box Guide, annual sales of the Fresh Produce program for schools and agencies amount to over \$500,000 a year, almost the same annual sales of the Good Food Box.

There are now eleven Good Food Markets operating, often in the same communities where the Field to Table travelling truck sold produce 16 years ago. In 2007, sales from Good Food Markets were over \$60,000, up from \$20,000 in 2006.

Having a warehouse, experienced dedicated staff, relationships with farmers, and an account at the Ontario Food Terminal allows FoodShare to develop a variety of produce distribution options of which the Good Food Box is one. FoodShare’s goals remain the same: to improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate and sustainable food. We have a variety of programs that all work toward this goal using a variety of distribution mechanisms.



FoodShare Programs 2008:

Student Programs

FoodShare has been addressing the issues of Student Nutrition for a number of years. We believe that food education and access are critical to the health of all children and youth and support this in the following ways:

Field to Table Schools

FoodShare believes that all children and youth should learn to grow and cook healthy food. Through the Field to Table Schools program the food system is brought to life with hands on activities and workshops. Students from JK to Grade 12 learn about composting, school food gardens, nutrition, basic cooking skills, local and global food systems and more.

Teachers can arrange in-class presentations, access resources and activity ideas through monthly teacher training workshops or book a field trip to the FoodShare Centre. When booking a field trip to FoodShare, teachers can choose from a menu of activities rooted in the curriculum and workshops, ensuring an appropriate and meaningful experience.

The Learning Centre provides students and teachers with hands on training in our kitchen, compost operation, Good Food Box warehouse and urban agriculture program while acquainting them with the behind the scenes activity of one of North America's largest food security organizations.

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Student Nutrition Programs

FoodShare works with the Toronto Partners for Student Nutrition to support over 500 local Student Nutrition Programs. FoodShare helps to ensure that 84,000 children and youth in the City of Toronto have access to healthy, culturally appropriate breakfast, snacks and lunches in their school or local community site. We believe that all children and youth require healthy food to maintain sound bodies and alert minds. Universal Student Nutrition Programs allow children access to healthy foods, help to develop life-long healthy eating patterns and reduce the incidence of social isolation within a community. FoodShare assists parents and volunteers running these programs by building community capacity through workshops and training sessions giving them the tools to achieve long-term sustainability for the programs.

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Fresh Produce program

The Fresh Produce program helps to make produce affordable and accessible for student nutrition programs in Toronto's elementary and secondary schools. Although

FoodShare feels it is always best to purchase from a local provider for high quality, local produce (like a farmers' market) this is not always possible as a school's need may be too large and transportation is often a challenge. Through the Fresh Produce Program FoodShare can order produce directly from local farmers and from the Ontario Food Terminal and distribute this produce to schools all over the city. Our knowledgeable staff work directly with organizers to determine the best products that will ensure their programs can run efficiently and successfully.

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Community Food Programs

“Good Healthy Food for All” is vital to a community's well being. No matter what socio-economic status, background, or means, we believe that all individuals and families should have access to healthy food through purchasing and/or developing their own sustainable means.

The Good Food Box program

The Good Food Box is an alternative distribution system that makes sustainable, local, and affordable produce more accessible to Toronto's communities. Professional evaluation of the Good Food Box shows that participating in the program helps people access a more nutritious diet.

The Good Food Box makes top-quality, fresh food available in a respectful and dignified way, fosters community development and promotes healthy eating. Customers pay the cost of the food itself, while distribution overheads are subsidized. For example, our family sized Good Food Box, priced at \$17, saves our customers \$5-\$10 off the retail cost of quality produce. The cost saving comes from purchasing large quantities of produce from wholesalers, directly from farmers, by using dedicated volunteers to help pack boxes and coordinate drop-off locations and by subsidizing the cost of the Good Food Box.

Supporting local and sustainable agriculture is also an important consideration for the contents of our boxes. In 2007, our boxes contained between 20-90% local produce, depending on the season. We also support local organic farmers by offering organic boxes. Thanks to our dedicated team of volunteers and staff we are currently distributing about 4000 boxes per month to about 200 neighbourhood-based drop-offs.

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Community Gardening and Urban Agriculture

Growing food in urban centres is an idea whose time has come. FoodShare has several programs to support individuals and groups to grow food in the city.



FoodShare works with community groups to assist them in acquiring the knowledge, expertise and resources necessary to start up a community garden. Toronto now has approximately 120 community gardens located everywhere from city parks to abandoned lots. In these garden plots gardeners grow food for their families, beautify their neighbourhoods and get in touch with nature's cycles.

FoodShare has a sprouting operation and beehives, using appropriate technology methods and recycled materials to produce organic food and seedlings for sale. This program also allows us to teach others about sustainable food growing methods. In 2008 we built on-site demonstration gardens and a new greenhouse producing organic seedlings and sprouts.

Off-site, FoodShare partners with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) to run The Sunshine Garden, a market garden at the CAMH Queen Street site. Twice weekly, from mid-June to October, we sell just-harvested vegetables at our farm stand. In the winter, we produce over 200 kilograms of edible pea and sunflower sprouts in the greenhouse at the Queen Street Site that are distributed to Good Food Box customers.

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Toronto Community Food Animators

The Animators project engages individuals and communities in bringing to life food-focused projects, such as community gardens, fresh produce markets and community kitchens. The project is a partnership between The Stop Community Food Centre, the Afri-Can FoodBasket, and FoodShare, the project leader. Food Animators work closely with local leaders and community agencies in Toronto's low-income, high priority neighbourhoods such as in North York, Scarborough, and Etobicoke.

In the three years that the Animators have been engaging community residents, there have been over twenty-one projects initiated, with forty local partners. We are working together to build local food security, increase leadership and capacity of individuals and communities and create vibrant public spaces.

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Good Food Markets

Neighbourhood based Good Food Markets are one-stand outdoor markets that sell high-quality and affordable fruits and vegetables. They are located in areas of the city where farmers' markets are not yet profitable, but are desperately needed to improve food access. These market stands not only improve food access and support local farmers, but they also have the potential to create vibrant community spaces.

FoodShare works in partnership with community organizations to run the markets. We purchase fresh produce from local farmers and from the Ontario Food Ter-

minal and deliver it to community organizations who run the markets. The markets feature seasonal and local produce in order to offer the greatest quality and value to communities.

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Community Education and Information Resources

Education is vital to our ability to take responsibilities for our well-being and our family's well-being. The education and information resource projects help community members access resources and services designed to improve their physical, mental, and financial health well into the future.

Healthy Babies Eat Homecooked Food

Making your own baby food is easy and affordable. The best thing is that you know exactly what's in it! FoodShare maintains a team of peer trainers who speak a variety of languages and who go out to community groups to teach Baby Food Basics. Topics covered include how to prepare and store your own baby food, when to introduce various foods and the basics of baby nutrition.

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FoodLink Hotline

FoodLink, a partnership with Community Information Toronto (CIT), answers calls from people looking for food programs in Toronto. Referencing a database of over 1,400 records, CIT counselors and FoodLink volunteers can refer to the full spectrum of food programs, from emergency food programs such as food banks and low-cost meals to community development programs such as community gardens, seniors congregate dining and peri-natal programs.

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Focus on Food Youth Intern Project

Focus on Food is a program for youth, between the ages of 15 to 30, who are facing barriers to employment. This program supports the participants to gain the job and life skills necessary for them to make the transition to school or work.

Participating youth are paid an hourly wage to work in several of FoodShare's programs: the Good Food Box program, Field to Table catering, Administration services and the urban agriculture program. The participants are also taught skills in finance, computers, nutrition, diversity and conflict-resolution which they can carry with them into their professional and personal lives.

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Field to Table Catering

Field to Table Catering offers an eclectic menu of fresh, affordable and seasonal foods for sale to community organizations and others seeking catering for events of any size.

Revenues generated from sales support the delivery of nutritious soups and meals to organizations serving the homeless and under-housed, as well as cooking training aimed at youth participating in FoodShare projects and people living in supportive housing.

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Toronto Kitchen Incubator

The Toronto Kitchen Incubator is a fully equipped industrial kitchen made available for use by entrepreneurs, small businesses and community groups. Started with funding from the Toronto Economic Development Corporation, TKI is available for a low hourly rate to members who would otherwise have to make a large investment in their own facilities. As businesses grow, they move on and make space for others to move in.

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