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WHY FOOD BANKS?

Geoffrey Lougheed

Introduction

The following is a speech given at Laurentian University. This educational facility, just as the other 2 colleges in Sudbury, has an active food bank. You will find my words open a dialogue as to the history, reasoning and future of food banks. I have given a wide scope of activities that fall under the tent of food security.

This publication is another opportunity to bring my message to a wider audience. Food Banks as an entity have changed substantially over the past 25 years. They started as small community and/or religious groups identifying a need and addressing that need. Today, some of the largest food banks provide millions of dollars worth of food to thousands of people every month. In a small city like Sudbury over 10,000 people access a food program every month. With this growth comes the complexity of organization you would expect.

Many people my age (50) can remember the effective advertising campaign for African Relief from famine. Those campaigns still exist today and are just as vital. Africa is a third world continent, it is hard to believe in a first world country that hunger is a concern - but it is! Feeding hungry people is what drives the food bank movement. The need crosses all distinctions of colour, creed, and age. Education is our ally and you can be an agent of change. Please read the speech, it is an invitation to help our cause. We believe we are all neighbours in the village of life.

I remember 30 years ago opening up a small pantry in the church to ensure people could get enough to eat. We might have had a dozen people a month access this food, and we were quite proud of our outreach program. Today, the Sudbury Food Bank helps feed over 10,000 people every month, through over 40 local food providers. We provided almost one million dollars worth of food products to our clients. We are involved with Infant Food Banks, breakfast and lunch programs at over 100 schools, daily hot food programs that operate 24/7 and of course with a multitude of non-perishable food banks. By in large the agencies we support are managed and operated by volunteers.

When we started, food banks were considered band aid solutions. We realized that volunteers should not replace government programs, but the stark truth is that they have. What began as a temporary good idea has become an important and dependable

part of the socio- economic netting in Canada. We protect the poor, providing a basic human need.

I believe most Canadians would see the work we do as a fundamental right of humanity. The same as shelter and clothing, food is a requirement to exist. We watch with horror the African infomercials, watching our third world neighbours starve to death. It seems almost impossible that here, in the first world, people can suffer from malnutrition. In no way do I want to lessen the real need of the third world but it certainly does give us pause for thought, that in the richest country in the world; (we have been rated number one, many times), that a basic human need is not being met. The reason for food banks is simple, they fulfill a purpose. I remember clearly in the early years we had an internal debate between food banks. Some people loudly declared; "we should all close down". The strategy was to force the government of the day to deal with this issue. The crisis would force action. In theory this was a valid proposal and it had wide spread support. The problem with instituting the strategy became obvious to the vast majority of food banks. When the doors were closed, the real victims of the proposal became our clients. In other words, we were proving our point by harming the very people we were trying to help. As food banks have become a part of the social fabric, this idea has lost favour and our advocacy has turned to new directions.

A co-founder of the Sudbury Food Bank, and a good friend of mine was the late Rev. Fr. B.J. McKee. He was the Director of Catholic Charities and an outstanding humanitarian. Father "B.J." did not have much use for red tape or for government. His idea of social welfare was simple, someone would give him twenty dollars in the morning, and by the afternoon he would pass the twenty dollars on to someone who needed it. He did not like "BS" and he was quick to tell you exactly what he thought, in language not always becoming of a priest. He became a legend for his character and kindness, truly a living saint.

One of the greatest lessons I learned about giving came from this humble man. One year he went to a number of local people and asked them to give their extra Christmas lights. He took these lights to Science North, a large community venue, and arranged an impressive display and this tradition continues on today. Of course the highlight of this event for Fr. "B.J." was the fact he stood at the end of the display with a bucket, to take donations. This event took place in December, a cold month, but Father wore only a ripped and patched raincoat. A local union gave him a proper parka and two local businesses did likewise. Of course all three coats were given away immediately to people who needed them. Father continued to wear this poor coat, in spite of the real fear that this elderly man might get sick.

I was twenty years younger than I am now, and much smarter. We all know that the younger you are, the wiser you are, or perhaps you just think you are. I clearly remember standing in Father's kitchen reading him the riot act, it is great that you are collecting money to help feed the poor, but at what cost? If you get sick you will be of no use to anyone, now get a proper coat on. With a twinkle in his eye, he gave me a knowing smile. He said; "Geoff, you just don't get it! I could wear a nice warm coat and when people pass by they would still probably give me a donation, but when they see

me in my old patched up coat, they recognize how real the need is and they are even more generous". He was right, it is a lesson that has never left me and will be with me for years to follow. When people understand a need, when people see a need, the spirit of giving and caring is a natural trait. That is one of the reasons that food banks over the years have been successful with support from the public. In a very real way we all know what it is to be hungry. It might have been a diet or that we were just too busy and missed a meal. Everyone can relate to that feeling in the pit of your stomach when it is empty.

I do not view food banks as a solution in the long term, I hope and pray for a day when an enlightened society embraces the responsibility of securing basic needs for every person--man, woman and child. There are many challenges and this will not be a short or smooth transition, but I believe in the ultimate goodness of people and the importance of advocacy to allow this goodness to blossom. I know it is common to expect food banks to lash out at the inequities of government, the welfare system or the minimum wage. There is no perfect system in place today, and when you understand a simple truth, that bureaucrats and politicians are people just like you and me. On the whole, over many years I would honestly say the vast majority of these individuals are caring and committed people, who often do not possess the resources necessary to effect the changes they believe are necessary. To be an effective advocate and voice for change, I believe you need to respect and understand the process, you know the real size of the pie, and you need to step up with ways to effectively increase awareness of the needs of the hungry as well as present models of change. It is one thing, to just complain, it is far more important to build bridges, rather than bonfires.

The idea of public protest has a positive effect on education and understanding of a problem to the public. It can raise awareness and help the government properly prioritize its agenda. It is of little good if it is not attached to specific proposals for change, hence the need for bridges. Failure does not bother me; every proposal will not be a winner. We must maintain vigilance of what is right, through successes and failures. I would like to share with you two personal journeys for real change; both have different outcomes, both have real value.

A number of years ago the government of the day held a study group on the needs of the poor in Ontario. This was not the first study, nor the last, but memorable to me because I testified in front of an all party panel. I listened patiently to the articulate and voluminous presentations before my own. They all identified the problem in great detail, some concentrated on the make up of those needing assistance, some the numbers of those needing assistance. The central theme of every presentation was, give me more money! When it came to my turn it was obvious this panel did not need more information, they had enough.

When I got up to speak, I threw away my prepared text. My colleagues had well educated these politicians on the details of the problem, and the solution of more money seldom will find favour with a government who must cancel other programs to find said money. So I simply gave a cost effective way the government could start to tackle the

problem of hunger. At the time the lion's share of people coming to food banks were on social assistance, unlike today, where we find a large component of the working poor.

In every larger community, the local health unit provided the true cost of a healthy food basket. This was broken down into weekly need, and developed to encompass up to a family of six. I suggested to the panel, this work is currently done by the provincial government; you simply take the findings of the health unit and give them to the local welfare office. The welfare office could then effectively release the appropriate and necessary funding to those on welfare to ensure a healthy food intake. I met with absolutely no resistance; everyone thought it was a great idea. So, why was it not implemented? The answer is just as simple, even though the government created the cost of a healthy food basket and the government controlled the welfare funding, they would not accept increasing the funding in the system to a level that they acknowledged as appropriate for health food.

I have not given up on this idea, but by any expression of measurement it has been a failure. I believe I learned much through this failure. I have planted a seed for change. I will water it, tend it and hope it grows. Timing is everything and I believe one day this idea will be adopted as policy in Ontario.

My second project was a tremendous success. Four downtown agencies, who all served the street population of Sudbury came together to create the Samaritan Centre. A catholic soup kitchen, a Pentecostal street mission, a Baptist counselling service and a secular health centre, all with separate and distinct boards of directors and vision/mission statements.

A local bureaucrat, Harold Duff, did outstanding work bringing the four different groups together, understanding they served the same clients with their differing services. They signed a joint working agreement and today they all work together in a brand new facility in downtown Sudbury.

The success of this project can be clearly seen as a government success. The city donated the land for the new building, the province gave strong financial support through the Heritage Fund and the Feds gave strong financial aid through FedNor. Both politicians and bureaucrats worked together to effect change. This was a success. Keep a simple and clear vision, communicate it well and often, place action dates to measure your progress and give everyone lots and lots of credit.

When I said parties don't matter, individuals do, I meant it. I have worked under all three political parties in Ontario, each has strengths and weaknesses but I can tell you they all have good people. Sudbury is case in point, we have a former NDP MP as our current Mayor who has raised the needs of the homeless to a new level and NDP MPP whose work with constituents gives a new measure to the word dedication and a Liberal MPP who as a member of his cabinet has brought literally millions of new dollars into our systems, and finally it was a Conservative MP who ensured federal grants flowed to many local projects. They all want to do well; their commitment and self sacrifices have improved the standard. John, Shelley, Rick and Tony may differ in their platforms but

they are unified in wanting the best possible for the people they serve. It is incumbent on each of us to show capable politicians and bureaucrats how the system can be improved. Unfortunately, the current system of governance has many pitfalls, an old teacher of mine used to laugh and say the best government would be a benevolent dictator, someone who could cut all the red tape and produce for the people. He was probably right, but democracy for all of its shortcomings is still better than any other real choice.

How do we effectively advocate to the government? Understand the importance of bureaucrats; they are the grease that moves a government so we need them to grasp not only the magnitude of the problem but the solutions. Do not call upon the politicians only in crisis. Our most effective changes have taken place by dialogue off the front pages, find ways to allow the politicians to help lead the way to solutions. The media is a great communicator, but the message must be refined, it must be captured in the 30 second sound bite. Most important is an education to the community, allowing them to participate in special events and food drives. They drive the rest of the system so true change lies at their doorstep.

My message, from the heart, is to speak about people, to people. We must be careful not to get so caught up in statistics, pie charts and self righteous rhetoric that we miss the message. Food banks are about providing food to the hungry. It is not about the 10,000 people every month getting food in Sudbury, it is about the baby who can't sleep because his mother has no formula, the student coming to school on an empty stomach, the street person battling addiction who can't remember the last time he ate, or the mother of three who is embarrassed to walk into a food bank because she thinks society will think less of her, but she still walks in because her children need to eat.

Mother Theresa - a great person - led by example when it came to the poor. In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize she summed up in a beautiful way her work and in a real sense the work of food banks. She said; "I will never do great things, but I can do small things with great love". The hundreds of local volunteers who run our food banks share that love, and that love is strong in Sudbury.

Conclusion

I hope my words have helped to frame our cause in your mind. I am from the realist part of society, and although I believe in sharing a social awareness for the hungry, I am far more concerned with meeting their needs.

Every one of us is given an opportunity to affect the world we live in that is the mantra of an optimist. That is who I strive to be. We can be easily overwhelmed by the pure extend of the need in our province, country and world.

Start with helping your neighbour.

Start with donating a can of food.

Start with giving an hour of your time.

The strangest chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The strength of our society is only as strong as the people who make it up. I hope in some small way my words give

you a vision of a better, kinder and caring world. I believe you are part of the solution in our Village of Life.