

Tina Osso dedicated to feeding area needy

Tracking world food trends is just part of the fight to end hunger.

By **Richard O Jones**
Staff Writer

FAIRFIELD — These days, Tina Osso is something like a meteorologist, examining a perfect storm of influences, trying to predict how hunger trends are going to play out so that the Shared Harvest Food Bank can operate efficiently and effectively.

Osso founded Shared Harvest in 1983. That first year, she delivered — almost single-handedly — 300,000 pounds of food to 12 food pantries in Butler County. In 2010, Shared Harvest delivered 17 million pounds of food to 85 pantries in five counties and five sister food banks serving another 34 counties.

To keep on top of that kind of tonnage, Osso has to keep on top of trends in agriculture and government, in economics and weather.

She thinks about the peanut crops in Georgia, nearly destroyed this year by a wet spring and drought-like summer, which makes one of her staple products — peanut butter — harder to come by.

She thinks about the grapefruit crop in Texas, also destroyed by drought, and the long-term effects of the Texas farmers who are selling off their herds because they can't produce milk.

She thinks about honeybees and how their demise has kept crops from being pollinated.

She thinks about fluctuating fuel prices, unemployment, global — “Dare I say it?” — warming, home foreclosures and a federal government intent on eviscerating all the government programs that have been trying, though not very effectively, to keep the country fed.

“I really think we're at a defining moment in this country,” she said. “Are we going to care for those who can't care for them-



Tina Osso, founder and executive director of Shared Harvest Food Bank. STAFF PHOTO BY NICK DAGGY

Selection Process

The Hamilton JournalNews is featuring 5 people who have positively influenced our community. These individuals have selflessly dedicated part of their lives to enriching the people and places around them. We chose these people based on their volunteering, the impact of their giving and their consistent commitment year after year.

selves, or are we going to push them out of the boat?”

“It's a slow-moving disaster that started in 2008. People want to protect what they have at the expense of everyone else, and they don't understand how tenuous that all is. They think they're lightening the load, but what they're really doing is putting holes in the boat so it sinks faster.”

The political, meteorological and social climate is such that the demographics of hunger are changing. With jobs scarce and health insurance costs rising, families that were once secure have seen their lives change in an instant by a sudden accident, illness or the loss of a job.

“We're seeing people who never thought they would be standing in a food pantry line ever in their lives,” she said. “It's a harsh realization for folks to understand

how quickly everything could collapse for them.”

It keeps her busy, to be sure. In terms of pounds of food distributed, Shared Harvest has had two straight record-breaking years and is headed for a third.

“Back in the day when I was a hippie and trying to save the world, I thought we'd be able to work our way out of a job,” she said.

It doesn't look like that's going to happen, but Osso is clearly in it for the long haul.

The Bad Child

Born in Hamilton, raised in Fairfield, Osso was always “the bad girl,” according to her brother Chuck Osso, who now works beside her as Shared Harvest's director of agency relations.

Food bank chief knows struggle

Hunger

continued from A1

“Tina’s done everything wrong,” Chuck continued. “Mom and Dad use to fight about her all the time.”

She graduated from Badin High School in 1971, and attended a series of colleges before getting an art degree from the College of Experimental Colleges and Universities, where she was able to develop her own curriculum.

She landed a job as a commercial artist for a Cincinnati firm, but when it closed the local office and tried to send everyone to Indianapolis, Osso didn’t want to go.

“I had a portfolio and a degree, so I thought I’d just find another job,” she said.

But the jobs weren’t there for her. When her unemployment ran out, she went on welfare and got government-subsidized housing for \$75 a month, but even that was a struggle to make.

“Every cent I had went to rent and I had no money for food,” she said. “At the time, for \$5 you could buy \$25 worth of food stamps, but I didn’t even have the \$5. So I heard about a food pantry at the United Methodist Church on McMicken,” which was the beginnings of Cincinnati’s Free Store.

“I went there to get some groceries and the food room was in terrible shape,” she said. “I offered to clean up because I didn’t want to take something for nothing.”

And she kept going back as a volunteer until the pantry got a grant that allowed them to hire Osso and everyone else who had been working there for free.

The defining moment in her tenure and for the Free Store there came during the blizzard of 1977.

“We remained open 24/7 and started working with four-wheel drive clubs, Boy and Girl Scouts and the Red Cross,” she said. “The Red Cross would find people isolated by snow, and the four-wheelers would come and pick up food and take it out.

“The whole Cincinnati area came to a standstill,” she said, “so hunger was a problem no matter how much money you had because you couldn’t get your car out of wherever you were.”

The blizzard elevated the Free Store from “a bunch of hippies to an organization that could respond to a challenge efficiently and effectively,” she said.

But two years later, a bad decision on her part changed everything, and she started another downhill slide.

Defining moment

Osso’s transition from bad girl to local hero began Thanksgiving Day 1979, when she was arrested in Cincinnati for possession of marijuana.

“We pulled her out of jail,” Chuck said. “I was the only one in the family who had access to an ATM and they wanted cash for bail.”

“I was in Central Station after I was booked,” Tina recalled. “I sat on a cot and the wom-



Tina Osso, executive director of Shared Harvest food bank in Fairfield. STAFF PHOTO BY GREG LYNCH

an next to me told me not to sit there because of what the woman before me did on it. So I sat on a wooden bench and bawled my eyes out because I thought that my life was over.

“God had been tapping me on the shoulder and I kept resisting it until he hit me in the face.”

She didn’t know at the time, however, just how much things would change because the transition took a couple of years.

She made a noble act of self-sacrifice by resigning from the Free Store, an organization that, like Shared Harvest, depends upon the kindness of its donors.

“I did not want my personal problems to detract from what the Free Store could do,” she said.

She took a waitress job at the Frisch’s Mainliner in Mariemont.

“I hated the work, but I met so many interesting people,” she said. “I was appalled at some of the kitchen practices I witnessed and didn’t stay there very long.

“I was on unemployment and living in Mount Adams, trying to sell my homemade spaghetti sauce and homemade bread, but I wound up not making it on my own,” she said.

Toward the end of 1982, she was back on welfare.

The Red Pantsuit

On March 4, 1983, Osso was in downtown Hamilton, heading for Elder-Beerman department store on High Street to return a red polyester pantsuit that her father had given her for Christmas, and she ran into a friend from the Free Store days who mentioned that there was a movement afoot to put a food bank in Butler County.

“I went to a meeting and offered to get it organized, then step away and get on with the rest of my life,” she said. “But then I started to realize there wasn’t anything in the rest of my life, that something was missing, so I went back to church and that’s where I found my calling.

“The first service I went to was about Matthew 25,” she said. “I went, ‘Ohhhh — so that’s why my life has been like it was up to that point. OK, then!’

The Free Store gave her an old

step van that she painted orange, and then she spent the next four months driving around the county to find out where the food pantries were and what they needed. She spent three days a week driving around, picking up food and delivering it, and two days a week in an office provided by the United Way rounding up donations and trying to find a warehouse she could afford.

Other than the orange van, her mode of transportation was a Yamaha 750 motorcycle. She would drive past the site that would soon be her warehouse nearly every day, but presumed she couldn’t afford it since it was right on a busy stretch of Ohio 4 in Fairfield.

One day, the clutch cables broke on her motorcycle right in front of the warehouse and she stopped beside the sign saying there was 9,000 square feet of warehouse space available. So she wrote down the number while she waited to be rescued by a friend with a pick-up truck, and made contact with Lester Besl and his brother Ervin.

“They were fairly well-off, but they were both country boys,” she said. “We made an appointment to meet.”

Apparently, however, Besl heard her introduction as “Tim Osso,” so she pulled up on her Yamaha, wearing fatigue pants and a tie-dyed T-shirt, and he said, “You’re a girl!” when she pulled off her helmet.

“I told him what the vision was, to be a warehouse that charities could draw from to help people in need,” she said.

He asked her where the money came from.

She said, “I don’t know yet.”

He asked her how she was going to do this.

She said, “I helped Free Store get started, so I’m sure I can do it.”

The warehouse, she says now, was perfect for what she thought she’d be doing and they negotiated a price “well below market,” at \$15,000 for a year’s lease.

The Hamilton Community Foundation gave her the money.

“I really believe that it was people like Lester, Cindy Parrish (from the Hamilton Community

Name: Tina Osso

Age: 57

Family: Monjoni, son, 25

Education: (high school/college) Badin High School, 1971; College of Experimental Colleges and Universities, 1975

Residence: Hamilton

Community Activities: Secretary, Butler County United Way Leadership Council; Chair, Five State Cluster of Feeding America Foodbanks; Chair, Emergency Food & Shelter Local Boards, Butler and Warren County; Board Member, National Commodity Supplemental Food Program Association; Advisory Board Member, Middletown Action Council, Greater Cincinnati United Way; Advisory Board Member, OSU Extension; Advisory Board Member, Ohio Americorp*VISTA Chair & Fiscal Agent, FEED Butler County Alliance

Foundation) and Mike Sanders at the Middletown United Way, who stepped outside their comfort zone and saw this crazy hippie on a motorcycle and gave her a chance to do what I really believe I was called to do.”

John Guidugli, president of the Hamilton Community Foundation, said that one of Osso’s strengths is that she doesn’t hide her feelings, that you always know exactly where she’s coming from, and that it’s coming from a good place.

“Her heart is in the right place,” he said. “Her head is in the right place to do a good job for the people she serves. Everybody knows where she is coming from and what she’s working for.”

In addition to providing the initial stake for the warehouse, the Foundation has provided help to buy refrigeration units and other equipment, and in recent years has been trying to provide general operating funds as well.

“The thing about giving to Shared Harvest is you know you can help a lot of people,” Guidugli said. “The food pantries are all doing a great job, but a gift to Shared Harvest is going to go a long way.”

He said she has spoken at a number of Foundation functions and has been impressed in her ability to make the problems of hunger personal.

“It’s not just about numbers,” he said. “She does a nice job of telling the stories of the people that she encounters every day.”

Single Motherhood

Though she was well on her way to fulfilling her calling, there remained one more rough patch.

“In the spring of 1985,” Chuck Osso said, “I was managing a SuperX drug store and Mom came in one day and said, ‘Do you know what Tina has done to me now?’

“I thought she’d already done just about everything else, so I guessed, ‘She’s pregnant.’”

Indeed she was. Osso considered marriage, but decided she didn’t want that, but would rather raise her son on her own. Again, she thought to do the noble thing and offered her resignation to the board of directors so that her personal issues wouldn’t be a poor reflection on Shared Harvest.

“They said, ‘Absolutely not,’” she recalled. “It was about the mission, not my problems.

“We’re all human and make stupid mistakes, but it’s what you do after that, what you’ve learned from it that matters.”

Motherhood, perhaps, sealed the deal for her commitment to feeding the hungry.

“I had lived in poverty and almost lived on the street, but nothing prepared me for the selflessness that parenthood causes

in you,” she said. “In that, I understood that I would do anything to make sure my son had enough to eat. It wasn’t easy being a single parent, but I never had to go without a roof over my head or food on the table. I can’t imagine the circumstances that would allow me to allow that.”

Her son Monjoni, now 25 and working as a free-lance video game designer in Austin, Tex., said that he wasn’t really aware of the impact his mother was having on the community until he started volunteering around the warehouse when he was in high school, filling food orders and helping sort and inventory what came in from food drives.

Through her work, he said, he credits her with teaching him not only about doing for others, but also how to live within one’s means.

“A lot of people don’t understand what it’s like to live on food stamps, or not be able to go to the movies, or to deny yourself the things that you want,” he said. “It’s proven very handy in this economy when trying to find a job has been a journey in itself.”

Building a Network

When it’s suggested that Osso has built something of a food service empire, she responded, “I never saw it that way. I look at it as erecting a network of people. There was this invisible magnet that drew us all together.

“I had no clue what we were starting. All I knew is that we were doing the right thing because the right things were happening.”

Rather than an empire, she suggested that it was “an island of misfits.”

“You have to be a little crazy because it isn’t easy and there’s no money in it,” she said. “The things you would normally find in a job, you’re not going to find here.

“It depends on how you measure success. Do you measure it by the things you have? Or by the things you give?”

“So if the question is ‘Why do I do what I do?’ the answer is ‘How can I not?’ You can’t save the world, but I can make a difference one meal at a time.”

Feeding the hungry is a Sisyphean task, she said, referring to the Greek myth about a king punished by the gods to roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this throughout eternity.

“The difference is that when you pick that rock back up again, there are different hands to help you the next time,” she said. “I’ve come to terms with pushing that rock.”

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