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Big Town **Big Heart**

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City Harvest's Food Lessons



Soledad Hearon was inspired to volunteer at City Harvest as a way to help eradicate childhood obesity.

City Harvest, a non-profit that has been feeding New York City's hungry men, women and children for over 25 years, has over 2,200 volunteers. When asked to honor someone in their helping community, the organization chose Soledad Hearon, a registered dietician who dedicates her time to teaching hands-on nutrition education courses for kids and families in low-income communities.

"Soledad has truly dedicated her life to preventing obesity in children. City Harvest is passionate about helping people understand the value of healthy choices in preventing diet-related diseases," explains Sarah Pearlman, who manages City Harvest's nutrition education classes. She points out that this year volunteers like Soledad have offered 60 courses throughout the five boroughs.

What many people don't know is that nearly 1.5 million New Yorkers live in poverty and basic necessities like food are not a given. With the recession and high unemployment in New York City, the need for emergency food has increased drastically. That's where City Harvest comes in. On a weekly basis City Harvest helps over 260,000 hungry New Yorkers find their next meal.

This year City Harvest, the world's first food rescue organization, will collect over 26 million pounds of excess food through resources including restaurants, grocers, corporate cafeterias, manufacturers and farms. The food is delivered free of charge to nearly 600 community food programs throughout New York City.

Hearon, raised in Queens as a child of Cuban immigrants, can relate to what she is teaching.

"When my parents separated, my mom and I had some tough times. I got married very young – at 18 and had my first daughter at 19 – that's when food security was my biggest issue," she says.

"I went to culinary school because I wanted to make sure I would never be hungry again," explains Hearon, who after culinary school fell into a lucrative but unfulfilling stint as a broker on Wall Street.

Soon after 9/11, Hearon quit Wall Street and took some time off to discover what was driving her passion. The answer was still food. She received a degree in nutrition at Montclair State University and became an outpatient dietician for Trinitas Hospital, a charity care hospital in Elizabeth, N.J.

"About 80% of my patients are obese children. I do a lot of work with these children and their families," she explains.

Hearon began volunteering with City Harvest this past spring. She readily admits that, after living the "big life" on Wall Street, she never thought she'd do anything for free. However, after teaching a six-week workshop for obese kids at a Staten Island agency, she became passionate about pursuing volunteer work with City Harvest.

"I got involved because City Harvest gets to the heart of it by covering everything from cardiac disease and vitamin deficiencies to poor health. They teach courses and work with established organizations on a broader scale, in

a way that people get it," she notes.

"For some reason, people think that nutrition is 'one size fits all.' City Harvest really knows how to take nutrition information, put it into a comprehensive program and inject it into an area where it is needed," she explains.

City Harvest's nutrition-focused programs encompass communities such as senior housing and elementary schools and include teaching bodega owners how to make stores healthier. In Operation Frontline, volunteer chefs and nutritionists provide cooking and nutrition education to adults, caregivers, children, teens, pregnant teens and people with HIV. The Produce Education Program is a hands-on, interactive cooking and nutrition education workshop based on seasonal produce that is made available by local farmers.

"I am very proud to be associated with City Harvest," Hearon says, explaining how important it is to make foods applicable to different populations.

"For instance, you wouldn't go into senior housing where they need soft foods and tell them to eat crisp fresh vegetables. Cooked fruits and veggies are better for their digestive processes." Hearon mentions that, if you are speaking to a Chinese community, you need to understand and respect that there is a spiritual quality that applies to their food and culture.

And for some communities, it's just a matter of learning simple techniques. "I think the City Harvest classes are really eye-opening for people who, for genera-

tions, have had no knowledge of how to boil simple produce," she says.

Hearon also understands that there is a limit to where you can go with children. "Some kids will look at fresh vegetables and say 'huh?' because they've never been introduced to them before. We teach them to perceive vegetables and fruits in a different way."

In Hearon's classes, children prepare foods like healthy muffins, pasta with sautéed vegetables, fruit parfaits and jambalaya. "The kids get so excited that they ask for leftovers to take home to their families."

Ultimately, Hearon teaches that food is love. "Preparing nutritious food for the people you care about is a way of communicating love and appreciation," Hearon remarks. After all, a love of food is what started Hearon on this healthy way of life.

"People with limited resources are so grateful for the time you're giving them. It's the most rewarding experience I have ever had," she concludes.

For more information on City Harvest, visit www.cityharvest.com or call (917) 351-8700.

— Holly Reich

About Big Town **Big Heart**

Big Town Big Heart is a series of articles showcasing organizations and volunteers who make a difference.