

Waste Not and MealConnect

Making Food Rescue Easy for the Community

STORY Marilyn Noble PHOTOS Brian Goddard

FOR MORE THAN 35 years, Waste Not Inc. has been rescuing edible food that would otherwise end up in the landfill and then distributing it to organizations that feed the nearly one million Arizonans who experience food insecurity. From its humble beginning, Waste Not has grown to include a fleet of five trucks that pick up and deliver food all over the Valley every day, which is a solution for major food donors like grocery stores and large nonprofit recipients like Salvation Army and local food banks.

But what about small restaurants, caterers and event venues that have excess food but nowhere to donate it?

MealConnect is a platform developed by Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization, that allows Waste Not to connect small donors, volunteer drivers and smaller organizations that might be left out of the existing food-rescue system. It's a way to bring the massive scale of food rescue down to a more intimate and personal community size. Since its debut in December 2019, it's become a valued tool for Waste Not's continuing efforts to get food to people in need.

The idea is simple: A donor can register on the Waste Not website, download a copy of the app and then let the program know when the business has excess food to donate. The platform will match the donor with an organization in the same general area of town, and then send a text to registered volunteer drivers in the same neighborhood to pick it up and deliver it.

Hillary Bryant, the community engagement manager at Waste Not, says it takes all the work and inefficiency out of the process.

"We used to actually pick up these smaller donations on our fleet of trucks. But it ended up wasting a lot of time and a lot of fuel. It really wasn't very efficient. With the MealConnect program, we've been able to offload that from our truck routes and really come up with a better solution on how to deal with that type of excess food."

A few weeks ago, photographer Brian Goddard and I followed a MealConnect delivery with Bryant and volunteer driver Wendell Hollinshead. We met at Urban Cookies Bakeshop at



Above, Hillary Bryant is the community engagement manager for Waste Not and runs the MealConnect program. Left, Urban Cookies Bakeshop in Phoenix is a regular contributor to MealConnect, donating boxes of their specialty cookies and cupcakes to nonprofits in need.

2325 N. 7th St. in Phoenix. The small bakery turns out beautiful cupcakes, cookies and other pastries, many of which are gluten-free and/or vegan. The staff had prepared several boxes of excess goodies to donate.

Owner Shaun Breese, who founded the company with her husband, Brady, says in their nearly 16 years in business they've always been committed to the community, and they've been donating their extra products to Waste Not for years.

"The interesting thing about MealConnect," she says, "is that it's the first time that we've really felt a more personal connection to our donation. It's been lovely. Before, it would

HOW IT WORKS

Small, ad-hoc food and drink donations find a good home



Waste Not volunteer drivers (like Wendell Hollinshead) pick up and transport. *Waste Not also train drivers and coordinates with donors and non-profits.

just be a random driver showing up in a truck and we had no idea where the pastries were going. But with MealConnect, we've been able to meet some of the people who are enjoying our donations. Now we can see more of a direct connection. And it's just so much more fulfilling."

Volunteer Hollinshead first became aware of Waste Not when he worked downtown in the mid-'90s and he and his wife would attend Empty Bowls, Waste Not's annual fundraiser. After a few years, work moved them to other parts of town, and they lost touch with the event. Twenty years later, a mutual acquaintance re-introduced him to Waste Not when the organization was looking for a new treasurer, a board position he was happy to fill. He remembered all those Empty Bowl events.

"It's a full-circle story for me," he says. "I still have bowls in my kitchen cabinet that we use every day."

In addition to serving as Waste Not treasurer, Hollinshead is a driver for MealConnect. He recommends volunteering for MealConnect as a way to do good in the community without having to contribute hours at a time or work on someone else's schedule. He shows me how the app works on his phone, "sort of like Door Dash for a cause," he laughs. Basically, the app delivers a text when there's a pickup and delivery to be made in the volunteer's vicinity. The volunteer can decline, and the text will go to the next volunteer on the list until someone accepts it. The app gives the details, and the driver can even pull up a Google map for directions.

"It's really that easy," he says. "It's this great volunteer thing you can do anytime you want."

Hollinshead loads up the car with boxes of pastries, and then we proceed to a residence that's part of Maggie's Place, a nonprofit that provides services to women experiencing homelessness during their pregnancies and new motherhood. House manager Maripat Lissner meets us at the door. She's an AmeriCorps member who lives in the house full-time to help the residents with anything they might need.

"We're available 24/7 to hold babies while moms take naps, to take moms to doctor's appointments, or accompany them to court hearings or anything like that," she says.

The house is an older home in a historic district near downtown. It's comfortably furnished, and baby toys are evident. Lissner says there are five residents now, and two just brought home their newborns the day before we arrived. Moms can stay until the babies are a year old, giving them time to learn parenting, financial and job skills; to join support groups or to take advantage of the many classes offered through the Maggie's Place Family Success Center. Ryan Uher, the marketing manager for Maggie's

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Empty Bowls

Empty Bowls is Waste Not's annual fundraiser, scheduled for October 15 from 10:30am to 1:30pm at the Arizona Center in downtown Phoenix. Local potters from the Arizona Clay Association donate hundreds of handmade bowls for the event. Twenty dollars gets the purchaser a ceramic bowl and a Salad and Go lunch. The bowls make beautiful holiday gifts. For more information see wastenotaz.org/emptybowls

Place, says the program is designed to give new moms life skills. "We're essentially here to provide that foundation for them to have an opportunity to succeed when they have a child."

Lissner says the food from Urban Cookies and other donors is appreciated by the residents in the house.

"It's just a morale boost, first of all," she says. "We have sweets here and it makes it more of a home. We do go grocery shopping every week, but that supplemental food is so helpful." She tells the story of a mom who lived in the house

and had an older child not in her custody. She was able to take cookies to that child's sports practices and feel like she was contributing, thanks to Urban Cookies.

"I heard from one mom that it just shows that they're not in it alone, that the community is behind them and supporting them," adds Uher.

Once a woman and her baby leave Maggie's Place to live on

their own, they can still come back to the Family Success Center for assistance if they need it. Many return as supportive alumnae to help mentor other women through the program, or even to become employees. Since its inception in 2000, Maggie's Place has served more than 1,000 moms and their babies. Currently, they receive about a hundred calls a week asking about the program, so the need in the community is significant.

In the fiscal year that ended June 30, Bryant says the MealConnect program rescued 35,128 pounds of food in 478 completed deliveries. "And keep in mind, this is people using their personal vehicles," she adds. It's a small fraction of the Waste Not total (3.5 million pounds delivered to about 80 nonprofit partners), but it's a new and growing program. Even though the pandemic put a halt to catering and events, and many restaurants were working with reduced capacity and menus, so donations were reduced, Bryant says Waste Not used the platform for other purposes, like delivering groceries to community elders through the Scottsdale Senior Center. She's excited to see how many more connections will be made once hotels are full again, catering companies are busy and people are back to work.

"This work means so much to Waste Not and our partner agencies," she says. "Providing these agencies with food allows them to focus on their specific missions without having to worry about how they're going to feed those that are hungry."

MARILYN NOBLE is the author of four Southwestern cookbooks and has written hundreds of articles on everything from aviation to agriculture and food. She also does communications work for nonprofits in the sustainable food and agriculture sectors. She was born in the desert Southwest and now lives in Tempe, where she serves as Slow Food's Arizona governor.

TAKE ACTION

For **MealConnect** donations from small businesses, go to mealconnect.org and enter your zip code or download the app.

For details about becoming a MealConnect volunteer driver, visit the **Waste Not** website, wastenotaz.org. New driver training is planned for the fall.

Maggie's Place is always looking for donations of cash and goods, and Lissner encourages people to check the website for the list of needed items. The organization also has a thrift shop that raises money to support the residences and programs. See maggiesplace.org.

To check out the menu at **Urban Cookies Bakeshop**, urbancookies.com.

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