

Together we can change lives!"

At this time of year, there are a lot of food drives for the needy. But empty cupboards are a year-round problem for many, particularly seniors. Now, thanks to Ruth Schwartz and her husband, Curt, hundreds of folks living on fixed incomes are getting their fill of food . . . and hope!

In an apartment in a senior housing complex in Novato, California, a woman sat alone eating dinner. On her plate was a lone baked sweet potato. No meat. No other vegetables. Just the potato.

Rent and medications ate up her Social Security check, leaving her precious little for food. Sweet potatoes were cheap. And at least I like them, she thought. But as she cleared the table, her stomach still rumbling, she worried: How much longer can I go on this way?

Little did she know that right down the hall, a couple was whipping up an idea that would fill not only her stomach, but those of hundreds like her . . .

Spark of hope

When Ruth Schwartz and her husband, Curt, had moved into the senior housing development a year earlier, they couldn't wait to meet their new neighbors. Being part of a community was one of the reasons they'd chosen to live there. That, and the subsidized rent.

Like most seniors living on a fixed income, Ruth and Curt had to watch their pennies. Paying rent based on their income was a great help. They could

pay their bills and have a little left over to go out to dinner once in a while.

But, as they settled into their new home, they were saddened to learn that many of the other residents weren't as fortunate. In the elevator and lobby, they'd hear people, their voices worried, talking about how no matter how much they scrimped, they couldn't make ends meet.

Many didn't have family to turn to. For others, their families were struggling, too. And in an ironic twist, while low enough to qualify for rent subsidy, their Social Security payments were just over the cut-off for government assistance programs.

And so they paid what absolutely had to be paid—rent and healthcare expenses—and when it came to food, they made do with whatever they could scrape together. Or even sadder, they went without.

This isn't right, Ruth thought. These people have worked hard all their lives. They've raised families. These were supposed to be their "golden" years. They shouldn't have to worry about where their next meal will come from!

"We have to find a way to help them," she told Curt. And, instantly, a light bulb

went off in his head.

For years, Curt had volunteered with an organization in a neighboring city that gathered surplus food from supermarkets to donate to needy families.

"Let's start a food rescue program," he suggested.

Feeding bellies, filling hearts

Excited, Ruth and Curt called local food stores. Instead of throwing away overstock, they offered, why not let us give it to needy seniors? "I hate that we throw away perfectly good food," managers admitted, jumping on board.

Ruth and Curt's complex manager was just as impressed by their plan and let them use a community room to distribute the food.

The day of the giveaway, people lined up hours before the doors opened. And once inside, they gasped in awe at the tables laden with bread, fruit, veggies, meat . . . all kinds of fresh goods, even flowers!

"We can really pick anything we want . . . for free?" they asked incredulously.

"Yes," Ruth said, and as if they were finally seeing the sun after a long stretch of rain, their faces brightened.

As they filled shopping



"We're doling out fresh food—and love!" says Ruth.

bags, the room echoed with lively chatter. And Ruth realized: She and Curt were providing a lot more than food. They were nourishing these folks' hearts.

Soon, Ruth and Curt were getting so many donations, that they decided to share their overstock with other senior housing developments in the area.

Realizing it would take more than just the two of them to meet such a big need, they began recruiting their neighbors to help.

"After what you've done, for us, we're happy to help," folks said.

In fact, they found helping others boosted their happiness. "I used to just sit home and watch TV," one woman said. "Now I'm doing something worthwhile!"

The giveaways got lots of seniors out of their apartments. As they "shopped," friendships were forged. And family members gained peace of mind, too.

At one giveaway, a woman rushed up to Ruth. "I live far from my mom. I send money when I can, but knowing you're here . . . it's such a relief!"

Today, Ruth and Curt's food rescue is an official non-profit—Respecting Our Elders (Respecting

OurElders.org). And with the help of 100 volunteers, they deliver more than \$4 million of fresh goods each year to 22 different senior housing developments! They also hold "open food" days, working with a church or the Salvation Army to help seniors living in the general community.

"I'm what you'd call a 'jack of all trades,'" Curt says. "I've held about a hundred different jobs in my lifetime. But this is the most fun and fulfilling. I am fed by the joy I see in the people we deliver food to."

"Christmas is doing a little something extra for someone."

CHARLES SCHULZ

Ruth couldn't agree more—especially at this time of year, in this season of giving.

"The most rewarding part for me is knowing that we've made a difference," she says. "My motto is: Life isn't always easy, but we're all in this together. And together, we can change lives!"

—Kathy Fitzpatrick



Put your extra food to work!

Use your surplus food to help someone in need by . . .

✔ **Hosting a potluck!**
Team up with friends to make dishes using surplus food, then surprise residents at a nearby homeless shelter with the feast! Be sure to check with the shelter's director first.

✔ **Redeeming rewards!**
Most grocery stores allow you to earn points to trade in for a free turkey or ham. If you qualify for one but don't plan to eat it, donate it to a church making Christmas care packages.

✔ **Feeding animals!**
If you have food that's not suitable to be donated, like grains past their "sell by" date, donate them to a farm for use as livestock feed. To find a farm, go to LocalHarvest.org.