

Jean Wu's Ingenuity Helps Build Community with Food

by Barbara Sleeper

It all began two years ago when a kind-hearted resident living in the 341-home Olympus I Homeowners Association wondered how she could embrace the popular phrase, “*bloom where you are planted.*” Using her own garage and the help of her family, Jean Wu started a Facebook group called *The Bread Booth* and launched her own food exchange. She started by giving away a few boxes of bread each week during an hour-long, pop-up event from her driveway. Her gift of food and community outreach bloomed from there.

“Our mission is to connect people with food and to love people well,” explains Jean. “By sharing food, we create opportunities for people to connect and develop relationships with one another. The weekly conversations that result, give us a pathway to build deeper relationships. Over the past two years, we have created a very special community of people who truly care about each other.”

Much of the food Jean shares is “rescued food,” items that didn’t sell at a grocery store or leftovers from other food co-ops. She often jokes that her group is an environmental *reduce-food-waste*

group, which in truth, it is.

According to Recycle Track Systems (RTS), the United States is the global leader in food waste, with Americans discarding nearly 40 million tons of food each year. That’s 80 billion pounds of food or approximately 219 pounds of waste per person. This waste represents \$161 billion or 30 to 40 percent of the total U.S. food supply. In fact, in their 2020 summary, RTS says food is the single largest component taking up space in U.S. landfills.

To help reduce this waste, Jean devotes endless hours sourcing the food she rescues. Bread Booth volunteers collect excess food from local food co-ops, the Mill Creek Community Food Bank, the Franz Bakery outlet and from other food rescue organizations. Her ability to connect people with food has been so successful that her group was invited to participate in the USDA Farmers to Families program.

Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed in April 2020, the USDA was given authority to purchase and distribute agricultural products to those in need. The USDA partnered with



Jean Wu started *The Bread Booth* from her own home in 2018.

national, regional and local distributors whose workforces were significantly impacted by the closure of restaurants, hotels and other food service businesses, to purchase up to \$4.5 billion in fresh

(Continued on page 30)



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Jean Wu (Continued)

produce, dairy and meat products from American producers of all sizes. To date, the program has given more than 117 million boxes of food to families impacted by the pandemic.

Jean unsealed a box to show me the contents. It contained 5 onions, 3 green peppers, 5 pounds of potatoes, 5 pounds of premium apples, 1 cantaloupe, 1 celery bunch, 1 bag of carrots, 1 large bag of fresh spinach and 1 large bag of mixed greens. Because the seal was broken, Jean said she couldn't give the box away due to Covid regulations, so I ended up sharing the contents with my fledged adult children and my neighbors.

According to Jean, *gleaning* is the ancient practice of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested, or from fields that are not economically profitable to harvest. It is an ancient Hebrew practice described in both the Torah and Bible.

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and



A Bread Booth family gleans excess blueberries from a Snohomish farm.

for the foreigner residing among you..." Leviticus 23:22 (New International Version)

"Modern-day gleaning looks a little different, but the heart of it remains the same," explains Jean. "The goal is to take care of those on the margins by inviting them to participate in community. Today, gleaning includes collecting unused food from restaurants, grocery stores and other specialty food shops. We glean from the Mill Creek Community Food Bank helping them remove items with expired dates or no dates at all."

"Last summer, I organized several gleaning events at a nearby Snohomish blueberry farm. The farm manager generously allowed us to pick in his twice-harvested fields. We had so much fun! We ate our fill while picking over 80 pounds of berries to share with the rest of the group."

Week to week, Jean never quite knows what to expect, but she says the group is always grateful for whatever comes their way, and they always have food to share. Last summer, the group received beets, onions, potatoes, squash and watermelons rescued from Washington state farms. Much of the food was gifted to them courtesy of a Woodinville farm called Farmer Frog, and EastWest Food Rescue, a locally operated food rescue organization.

Prior to the pandemic, the Bread Booth had just under 200 members and roughly 40 to 50 families that participated in the weekly food distributions. The members would gather and visit around two food tables set up in Jean's driveway. Due to State Covid regulations, masked volunteers now pre-bag an assortment of food and load all the bags and pre-sealed USDA Farmers to Families boxes into the open trunks of the members' cars when they line up every Monday and Friday.

Jean started hearing more and more stories about food insecurity as many members had tighter food budgets after Covid-19 hit. Membership in the Bread Booth also started to soar. They now have more than 700 online members.

People also started driving from farther

and farther away to attend the Bread Booth events, and the increasing traffic volume began to worry her volunteers. While Jean looked for alternative venues to host their pop-up food events, her members responded by organizing themselves by neighborhoods so one person could pick up food for several families to help reduce traffic flow. Offers to pick up for others began peppering their Facebook page.

"It was heartwarming to witness how committed everyone was to protect The Bread Booth and continue to make things work," says Jean. "Willing to pitch in and problem solve, our members pressed further into community to keep helping one another, and this inspired me to keep going."

"Having 70 or more cars line up on my residential street twice a week did become a problem," admits Jean, "but after a brief conversation with the Venture Church of Mill Creek, they agreed to let us use their spacious parking lot for food distribution. Using two lanes instead of one, we can now get more food to people, faster. The church's generosity means we now have room for growth. It also feels like a positive confirmation that we are doing the right thing."

"Thanks to Venture Church," Jean continues, "we can now dream a little bigger. We hope to host larger, one-time giveaway events so our members can invite their neighbors. We've also been invited to participate in various community service projects. We now help maintain Olivia Park Elementary school's community garden and help stock the food pantry at the Vintage senior-living apartments in Mill Creek. It is encouraging to see our members step up to serve the community."

"Jamie Howard, a Bread Booth member living in Canyon Park, offered to launch a group to care for members in her area," continues Jean. "This group has now spun off and become independent from us. Jamie is networking with other sources for food and is building community in her own neighborhood, even sharing food with Frank Love Elementary school whenever she has extras. She is truly a gem in her community."

Bread Booth members have also started other mini food-sharing communities in Silver Firs and at Silver Lake where a few women have volunteered to distribute food in their neighborhoods. “Food is such a great connector,” adds Jean. “I love listening to their stories as they get to know their neighbors better.”

“People always want to give back via an act of service,” she says, “but instead, I like to direct folks to what I think is more valuable, developing positive nurturing relationships. My goal is to keep members socially engaged during this stressful time of Covid isolation. To foster a greater sense of togetherness, I often encourage people to share recipes in our Facebook group.”

“I can tell you who the bakers are, who has a sweet tooth, whose kids love donuts or bagels, and who to go to for nifty cost-saving ideas,” Jean grins. “We often give away one identical food item in every bag each week, so we play our own version of

Iron Chef with that item. It’s amazing to see the diversity of dishes people can make using the same ingredient!”

“The Bread Booth has been one of my bright spots this year,” admits Jean. “The way everyone has reached out to one another, helped with deliveries, shared inspiring recipes, and gotten to know one another better has been amazing. The kindness is so uplifting!”

“Practicing generosity is important because it benefits both the receiver, as well as the giver,” continues Jean. “When food is offered up, it is important to not only take for yourself, but to share food with others, together. This way, no one feels ‘less than’ as the giver and receiver both share in the delight of the bounty being offered.”

“We are all individual pieces of a bigger puzzle,” posted member Sabrina. “We share recipes, food and good cheer. We look out for each other.”



A family affair, Jean’s sons’ Davy and Cody helped distribute watermelons last summer.

“I cannot count the many times the Bread Booth has come to my rescue when my funds were almost zilch and my cupboards were empty,” gratefully raves Bread Booth member Jan. “It’s frightening to be hungry and have no idea how you can feed yourself. The food drop-offs,

(Continued on page 32)

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Jean Wu (Continued)

the private messages asking if I need anything and the genuine caring and concern are wonderful. The Bread Booth put a smile back on my face and warmth in my heart.”

According to Jean, Bread Booth members practice generosity both on an individual level and as a group. Last summer, the Bread Booth organized a fundraiser for the Mill Creek Community Food Bank. Members purchased Krispy Kreme donuts to support the food bank’s efforts to distribute food to the community. “We smashed our goals with our first ever fundraiser!” beams Jean.

“I am so appreciative of all the volunteers who have come our way,” she adds. “I haven’t had to recruit anyone. People just show up and join in. It is such a beautiful thing to watch people do volunteer work that brings them joy.”

“Due to Covid-19, we have been an unemployed family of five since February,” says member Aisha. “The Bread Booth food resources have kept our heads above water.”

“My gratitude cannot be expressed in words how much you guys help me feed my three children,” says Brittany. “This takes a huge burden off my shoulders and I don’t have to worry where our next meal comes from anymore. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Food insecurity prevents people from sleeping at night,” shares Jean. “One member thanked me, explaining that

instead of worrying about where her next meal will come from, she can now relax and enjoy more time with her grandchild. The isolation caused by lack of food can really interfere with the nurturing social relationships most needed by seniors, single people and those experiencing financial hardship.”

“A little over a year ago something majorly unexpected happened to us, a job loss,” adds member, Aimee. “It hit us pretty hard and we quietly went about life feeling a little defeated. Then we found out about the Bread Booth. At first, it was hard to stop by because I thought people would ask ‘why are you here?’ But that first visit changed my heart. I saw a ton of people around the tent greeting each other, having a great time, and asking if we needed a bag. We were just grateful to get a few loaves of bread for the week, because for

us it was just one less stress on our plate.”

“I was raised being told ‘you are blessed to be a blessing’ and I feel this is what the Bread Booth is all about,” continues Aimee. “Every week we are blessed with so many great things and this abundance is then shared and used to bless others. I look forward to seeing everyone every time I go.”

“I LOVE it when kids ask for and get to hold the donuts,” says a BB volunteer in charge of passing out treats. “It makes Friday so fun with all the smiles. My son calls the Bread Booth the ‘donut booth.’ It makes his day every time he gets one.”

“Just in case there is someone like me, that was initially afraid to participate with the Bread Booth,” adds Aimee, “I encourage anyone that needs help to dive on in and be okay with being blessed.”

“When we have the courage to dive below the water line,” agrees member Sue, “we show that vulnerability is perfectly fine and normal. By doing so, we create a ‘safe place’ for others to do the same.”

Reflecting on all that has happened in the past two years, Jean says, “I never expected The Bread Booth to get as big as it has. I am so grateful for all that we have accomplished and for the opportunity to practice loving others well. I believe we have helped inspire positive and uplifting speech, generous acts of service, and proven that sharing food is the best way to unite people for the greater good.”

If you would like to make a donation of food or funds, or if you need nutritional help from The Bread Booth, please contact Jean Wu at The Bread Booth Facebook Group, or email her at jeanhwong@hotmail.com



Bread Booth members help maintain and glean from an Everett community garden.



Children enjoy getting treats at the free food giveaways.



Jean Wu works tirelessly to help families in need of both social and nutritional support.