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VB native designs small clothing with a

Big Goal





Senior Resource Association's Meals on Wheels program provides meals to hundreds of people each week.

Time to Get Our Mise en Place

ENDING HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY REQUIRES MORE FROM ALL OF US



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

The first meal I prepared for my wife, Stephanie, was on February 14, 2009. At the time, I was a widowed father of two young children living in Evanston, Illinois, and she was a smart, attractive “city chick” living in a high-rise apartment in downtown Chicago. We had recently started dating and I wanted to make a special Valentine’s Day dinner for the two of us.

From our conversations, I knew Stephanie had a gourmet chef’s kitchen that she rarely used. I also knew she had a beautiful view of the Wrigley Building, the Chicago River, and Lake Michigan from her dining room. It would be romantic but not over-the-top, as big-city date nights can sometimes go.

The menu for the night was simple, elegant, and nothing like the “kid

food” I was accustomed to preparing. It had been a while since I had cooked an adult meal for someone else, so I opted for something easy that required little preparation. Mixed greens with goat cheese, sliced beets, and crushed pistachios to start. Prime steaks in a pan with butter and herbs, roasted red peppers, and sautéed mushrooms for the main course. My own signature “Pick’s New

“There are several local charitable organizations working to alleviate hunger in our community. . . .”

Orleans-style” bread pudding with caramel sauce for dessert. All to be paired with a bottle of Merry Edwards Pinot Noir from Sonoma County, California.

Running a little late due to traffic, I opted for the first parking spot I found instead of circling. It was a brisk two-block walk, and my ears and cheeks were stinging by the time I reached her building. Stephanie greeted me with a peck on the cheek, and I asked for a cup of hot coffee.

“No coffee, but I can make you a cup of hot tea,” she said. “Living alone,

with stores and restaurants so close by, I actually don’t keep much here.”

I passed on the hot tea and followed her toward the kitchen. She watched quizzically as I washed my hands, unpacked, and organized the ingredients and cooking utensils for the evening’s meal—following the wise culinary practice of *mise en place*.

“In the words of celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, *mise en place* is the religion of all good line cooks,” I told her by way of explanation. “Unfortunately, I forgot the butter.”

As I turned to open

the refrigerator, I caught a glimpse of Stephanie shuffling toward the front door with slippers on as she said, “Headed to the bodega in the lobby. Be right back!”

I was confused. I opened the refrigerator door and suddenly everything was illuminated. The entire contents of her refrigerator consisted of five or six items—and that count included the small box of baking soda! It was such a stark contrast to my own kid-friendly refrigerator back home that I was in disbelief.

No butter. No eggs. No string cheese. No

chocolate milk. No apple juice. No wayward Lego or doll part. As I wondered exactly what undomesticated planet I had landed on, Stephanie returned from the lobby grocery store.

“I didn’t know if you needed salted or unsalted butter,” she shouted from the entryway, “so I got both, along with some candles for the table.”

We raised a glass, toasted each other, and enjoyed a meal and a conversation about our future that still stands out as one of the best dining experiences of my life. Beyond physical sus-



The Mobile Mercado, a “grocery store on wheels,” brings healthy foods into low-income areas.

tenance, the shared meal nourished my soul.

It has been more than a dozen years since that meal, and almost half a century that I have lived without ever experiencing something that approximately one out of every eight Americans faces every day—food insecurity.

While hunger refers to a personal, physical sensation of discomfort, food insecurity refers to a lack of available financial resources for food at the household level. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines it as a

lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. It is estimated that in 2020, over 38 million people, including almost 12 million children, were food insecure. In Indian River County, those numbers are approximately 20,000 people who are food insecure, including more than 3,000 children.

For perspective, 3,000 children equals the total number of babies born to Indian River County mothers during the last two years. Three thousand children equals the total number of students who

graduated from Vero Beach and Sebastian River high schools in 2021 and 2022.

One of the most significant indicators of food insecurity and whether residents can access healthy food in Indian River County is distance. Proximity to stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables makes a difference.

According to the USDA, in 2020 more than 53 percent of Indian River County residents lived more than a mile away from stores selling fresh produce. While this problem may not seem challenging for residents with reliable transportation, it presents a barrier for those who do not own a vehicle, and the problem is worse for seniors.

There are several local charitable organizations working to alleviate hunger in our community by addressing food insecurity among our most vulnerable residents. Each organization has demonstrated a track record of operating proven programs that deliver results year after year. More importantly, these efforts are making it possible for more people to experience the joy of sharing meals, nourishing souls as well as bodies.

In January 2020, United Against Poverty opened a new UP Center to house community programs including its

Member Share Grocery Program. Each day, this cooperative grocery store gives more than 1,000 Indian River County families who live at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level access to affordable, nutritious food. For example, two parents who work full-time jobs earning \$12.50 per hour can shop at the UP Center for the ingredients to make healthy meals for themselves and their two children. *Mise en place* for everyone.

The Treasure Coast Food Bank, a St. Lucie County-based organization, expanded its reach to serve Indian River County families by putting a “Mobile Mercado” on the road in 2020. This was made possible, in part, with a grant of \$100,000 from Indian River Community Foundation. Each week, this fully outfitted “grocery store on wheels” makes stops in 12 low-income areas of our community to distribute healthy food to residents who do not live near a grocery store or market.

For years, Senior Resource Association has helped alleviate hunger and reduce food insecurity by providing free transportation through its GoLine public transit system, which now includes a stop at the UP Center. The organization has also provided years of



Treasure Coast Food Bank serves 41 million meals each year to residents of Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie counties.

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines [food insecurity] as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

service specifically to our community’s senior population through its Meals on Wheels program. Five days a week, hundreds of low-income seniors, many of whom live alone, receive hot, nutritious meals delivered to their doors by SRA volunteers. Beyond nourishment, these visits give seniors a sense of security while also providing them with

a daily wellness check. The Food Pantry of Indian River County, Our Father’s Table, and Shining Light Garden Foundation are all working to ensure that no member of our community goes hungry. They are making more shared meals possible.

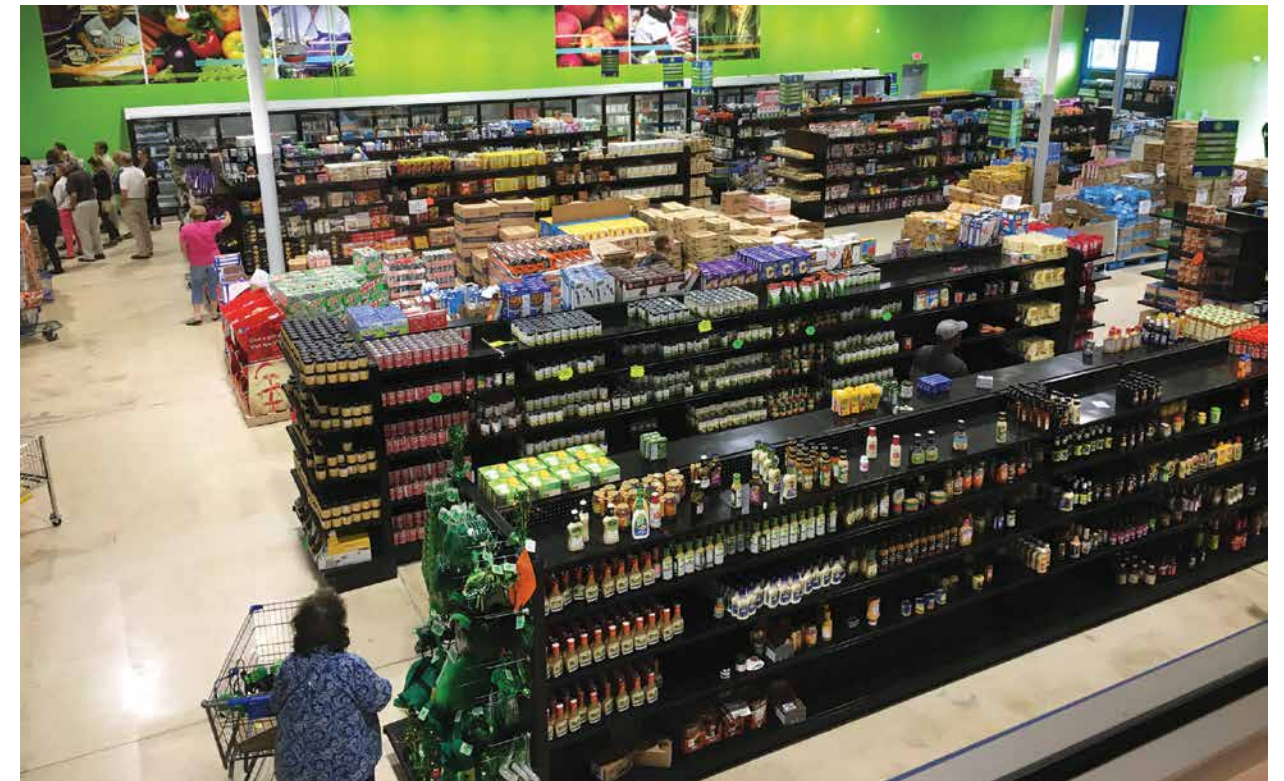
In the coming year, I will turn 50 years old. While the world is full of

uncertainty, one thing I know for sure is that my year will be filled with many shared meals, celebrating my milestone birthday or simply celebrating my wife, family, friends, clients, and colleagues. There is virtually no chance that I will go hungry or feel the anxiety and stress of food insecurity. I know this is not the case, however, for

too many of our neighbors who live here in one of the wealthiest counties in Florida, in the richest country in the world.

Yes, there are many good people and charities working to solve this problem. However, they need much more financial support and volunteer help from me and you.

It is time we get our *mise en place*. ☺



United Against Poverty’s Member Share Grocery Program enables residents to shop for the products their families need.

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