Blessings of the Bounty

With a wellspring of determination, ingenuity, and grit, ***Kathleen DiChiara*** founded one of the nation's most successful charitable food distribution programs.

BY PATTI VERBANAS

KATHLEEN DICHIARA DIDN'T SET OUT TO BE A COMMUNITY activist. Three decades ago, this mother of two young children never dreamed she'd learn to drive a forklift, launch fund-raising campaigns, and change the lives of millions of New Jerseyans. It wasn't a life she chose; it was a life that chose her. And DiChiara wouldn't have it any other way.

At her core, the founder, president, and CEO of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey says she is simply "a housewife from Summit who cared." Altruism was always a part of DiChiara's life, woven into her moral fiber by her parents. "They taught empathy by example," she says. "When I was young, we lived six blocks from a railroad track. Hobos would stop by — I'm sure there was a mark on our house somewhere — and my mother sat them down at the picnic table with a sandwich. Often we would sit with them. If someone stopped and needed help, my mother would be sure they got it."

That charitable spirit instilled by her parents was reawakened in 1975 while DiChiara listened to a sermon in church. The priest suggested that during Lent the parishioners abstain from eating meat on Wednesdays and Fridays in solidarity with the hungry. Poverty and hunger were already on DiChiara's radar — her sister was a missionary nun — but the sermon made her wonder, *If there is starvation on other continents, surely*

PHOTO BY JERRY MCCREA/THE STAR-LEDGER

there are hungry people here. After church, she stopped the priest and said, "Solidarity is great, but how about we ask people to donate the funds that they're saving by not eating meat twice a week and purchase canned goods to donate?" Though she convinced the priest that she could find these "hidden hungry" in Summit, others were more skeptical about the need for such work in an affluent community. "People said, 'We don't have hungry people here,'" she remembers. "But we did then. We do now."

She set up a command center in her kitchen and used her garage to store the food collections, then started calling hospitals, churches, and charitable organizations to broadcast her initiative. As word spread, volunteers and contributions grew, and DiChiara started bringing the excess to Newark emergency pantries, which she soon cultivated into a network of feeding programs throughout Essex County.

By 1978, the operation had outgrown DiChiara's home. With the assistance of the archdiocese of Newark, which provided a larger space, she developed an emergency food program to serve its four-county region. Around this time, she became aware of America's Second Harvest (now called Feeding America), an organization in Phoenix that had a system for soliciting and processing large donations. They called it a "food bank." DiChiara's operation became a member of its network of charitable agencies in 1981, and the following year formed the nonprofit Community FoodBank of New Jersey. As contributions grew, the FoodBank moved from one Newark warehouse to another; in 1993 the board of directors purchased its current headquarters — a 280,000-square-foot former Kraft Foods warehouse in Hillside.

Last fiscal year, the FoodBank distributed 28 million pounds of food to more than 1,500 charities in 18 counties. But DiChiara realizes that feeding the poor only solves the immediate problem. Empowering those less fortunate is a long-term investment. Every time the

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Annie Leibovitz donated this photograph of Bruce Springsteen taken backstage in Philadelphia in 1999 for the Photographers Against Hunger fundraising campaign to benefit the Community FoodBank of New Jersey.

FoodBank expanded, DiChiara used that growth as an opportunity to provide job training and employment. "I looked to see who was at the end of the line," she says. "Many were people just out of prison or drug rehab, but no one would take a chance on them. If they were non-violent offenders, I decided those would be the people I'd hire."

Today the FoodBank employs a staff of 140 and has more than 24,000 volunteers who work on the various facets of the organization, which, other than food distribution, includes services such as a children's clothing distribution center and a Kids Cafe that provides nutritious meals to needy families. "I would match this staff against any other," DiChiara says. "They are people who have done something wrong, paid the price, and are ready to turn their lives around."

True to the values her parents instilled in her, DiChiara included her children in her mission and brought them to homes and soup kitchens. "That was the hardest thing: balancing my family and the FoodBank," she says, remembering how basic her initial undertaking was — and how it grew. "Back then I wouldn't have said yes to giving 30-plus years of my life, but now I wouldn't give back any of the days — and there are many of them when I cried. Without my husband's support I would never have been able to do this."

When asked about the accolades bestowed upon her, DiChiara is characteristically dismissive. "I'm not a walking

saint," she says with a laugh. "I just made the leap from do-gooder to doing good. The bridge between the two is that my heart still informs what I do, but my head informs how I do it — and that means operating with sound business principles."

DiChiara's business acumen was put to the test during the recent recession: The need for food spiraled up, and she worried that donations would decline. She turned to Bruce Springsteen and with his help launched the successful "We Can't Let This Bank Fail" campaign. Last spring, 14 famous photographers joined forces with *Backstreets* magazine to create the Photographers Against Hunger fund-raiser to benefit the FoodBank. Each photographer

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donated an original signed print of an iconic Springsteen image. Individuals then donated a minimum of $25 to put them in the running to win one of the prints. The event raised $130,000.

It's just another battle fought — and won — for DiChiara, but she knows that ultimately, hunger is a war she cannot win. "When I was young, I wanted to be a lion tamer, but I wanted to do it without the chairs. I wanted to talk them into what I wanted them to do," she says. "I think I *am* a lion tamer — it's just the lions are issues and not animals." NJL

For more information on the Community FoodBank of New Jersey and its latest initiatives, visit **njfoodbank.org**. For volunteering ideas, visit **newjerseylife.com**.

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