Colby food service chief's efforts to eradicate child hunger awarded

Joe Klaus, one of six of the Sodexo Foundation's 2013 Heroes of Everyday Life, dedicates talents, time to getting food where it's needed most

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Joe Klaus, who oversees the food services at Colby College, says many Mainers go hungry despite widespread food surpluses.

"Having available food is not the issue. And when it comes to hungry people, the need is great," Klaus said Thursday. "The issue is connecting the dots."

One such unconnected dot came to Klaus three years ago, in the form of several thousand pounds of unsold potatoes sitting in a warehouse.

The warehouse was owned by Fedco, a Waterville-based co-op that every year sells about 400,000 pounds of seed potatoes along with seeds, bulbs and other supplies to growers.

Fedco coordinator David Shipman said the excess potatoes are used as animal feed if no one comes forward to put them to better use.

One member, Tom Roberts, who owns Snakeroot Organic Farm in Pittsfield and is a member of the Maine Harvest for Hunger, knew just what to do.

He called Klaus.

Klaus, a stocky man in a sports coat and button-down shirt with hints of gray showing at his temples, has two permanent reminders of what he says was an accident-prone boyhood.
The first is a faintly visible scar on his upper lip, caused by a mishap with an ax.

The second is his enduring passion for food, which he said he came to by way of an accident.

In this case, the accident was a bone-crunching tumble from the seat of a bicycle while on an ill-advised ride down a steep, grassy hill. In the weeks that followed, his movement limited by crutches, he spent long hours in the kitchen of his boyhood home, watching his grandmother cook.

That accident, and the resulting exposure to the importance of food, set Klaus on a course that brought him to his current position as operations manager of Colby’s dining services, which is what made him the perfect person for Roberts to call about Fedco's potato problem.

When he got the call, Klaus and a co-worker drove to Fedco's warehouse, located in Clinton, and loaded the enormous pile of spuds into a box truck.

He then hauled them back to the Colby campus in Waterville and began calling the 25 or 30 local food pantries that he has worked with in similar situations. Some came to pick up their share of the bounty, while Klaus arranged for delivery to others. A dining services manager volunteered to fill his trunk with the potatoes to drive them to a pantry in Vassalboro.

In a matter of days, the potatoes had all been put to use, helping to feed people in need.

Meeting the hunger challenge

Getting the perishable potatoes to people who need them is just the sort of time-sensitive challenge Klaus faces on a daily basis in the dining halls of Colby.

If a light bulb goes out, if a food cart breaks off a piece of granite countertop, if thunderstorms kill the power to the freezers containing perishable food, Klaus gets the call, sometimes in the middle of the night.

In his 31 years with Sodexo, the company that provides Colby’s dining services, he’s dealt with disasters caused by fires, gas outages and blizzards. Once, while working at a new 40-bed Catholic hospital in Washington, D.C., a series of snowstorms shut down the city's public transportation system, forcing him to trek six miles to work, where he joined a skeleton crew supplemented by nuns from the adjoining convent in serving free food for the day to the hospital’s snowbound workers.

That was a big challenge, but eliminating child hunger in the region is a much bigger one. Klaus has tackled it with all of his energy and talent, having directed 300,000 pounds of produce to food pantries as a member of Maine’s Harvest for Hunger, one of the major players in combating hunger in the state.

Still, Klaus said, he is "small peanuts" compared to the Good Shepherd Food Bank, which performs a similar function at its Auburn location.

Klaus was recognized as one of six 2013 Heroes of Everyday Life by the Sodexo Foundation, which gave a $5,000 grant to the hunger-related charity of his choice, the
Greater Waterville Area Food Bank.

Sodexo's campaign to end child hunger cites statistics showing 50 million Americans, including 16 million children, are affected by hunger.

In Waterville, nearly one in four children is considered "food insecure," meaning that they don't have a regular and reliable source of food.

Since coming to Colby in 1998, Klaus has done things like organize food drives and find low-cost refrigeration equipment for local pantries.

He has helped to raise both money and vegetables, the latter in the form of a campus garden that was begun at Colby in 2008, and which directs 1,500 pounds of vegetables a year to those in need.

**Food waste helps the hungry**

Klaus knows the national food supply chain well, in part through regular visits to New England's largest food hub in Boston, which sees about 60 percent of the produce sold throughout the region.

The nation's food chain is rife with inefficiencies, he said, because of the uncertainty of what will happen between the time a seed is planted and the time the end result is sold.

The system for food to be sold is robust, typically getting food from a farm in California to a plate in New England in three days. But there is no well-developed system to deal with the byproduct of the inefficiencies: the food that is not sold.

"Forty percent of all produce raised never makes it to market," he said.

Many factors contribute to that result. A hailstorm can pierce the skins in an apple crop, making the fruits unappealing. A farmer may be unable to muster the labor necessary to harvest the food when it becomes ripe. A very good growing season can seem like a boon for a farmer, until he realizes that the same boon has helped all of his competitors, creating a market glut that makes his food impossible to sell before it spoils.

Sometimes, good food is not quite good enough to meet exacting standards in the contracts of large retailers such as Hannaford and Shaw's. Klaus said he recently wound up with thousands of pounds of 7-inch cucumbers, grown by an unfortunate farmer who had failed to meet a supermarket chain's desired range of 4-to-6-inch cukes.

Klaus is part of a network of people trying to establish a supply chain between these often-unpredictable events, and people who can't comfortably afford to feed themselves.

"My goal is to utilize it before it goes bad, especially if it's several thousand pounds," he said.

In the same way farmers cultivate food, Gould cultivates a crop of farmers who are willing to redirect their unused produce to those in need.

He constantly seeks opportunities to add willing farmers and suppliers to his growing list of contacts. Gould said it is typically an easy sell, because many in the food industry have a passion for feeding the hungry.

While he sometimes reaches out by phone, he said, he's learned the impact is greater when he visits a farm in person.

"They can look you square in the eye and shake your hand," he said.

Klaus also makes use of gleaners, his term for volunteers, including some Colby students, that sniff out and collect food while combing through the nooks and crannies of the supply chain.

Thursday night, a small team of gleaners headed by Klaus pulled into the Waterville Concourse during the final minutes of a weekly farmers market, looking for produce that
had not sold and was unlikely to sell.

The team walked away with several totes full of food, destined for places such as the Sacred Heart Soup Kitchen, the Evening Sandwich program of the Universalist Unitarian Church, the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter (where Klaus has prepared and served about 6,000 meals), the Vassalboro Food Station, and the Fairfield Interfaith Food Pantry.

Klaus said he plans to take his efforts to combat hunger in central Maine to the next level.

He is considering establishing an area hub with cool storage capabilities, where everyone, from private vegetable garden owners to established vendors, can conveniently donate food for redistribution to those in need.

Such a hub would be a major step forward, he said, in the effort to bring a reliable source of food to all of central Maine’s families.

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