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Salinas-area volunteers join in as Ag Against Hunger gleaning season starts Saturday

Ag Against Hunger volunteers work to provide produce to local food banks

BY RUSTEN HOGNESS

For The Salinas Californian

On a chilly November morning during Ag Against Hunger's final glean of the 2008 season, Mary Schapper spotted a large, white bulb, bent down and grabbed the stalks.

She slid the sharp, flat top of the harvesting knife into the soil just below the surface and severed the roots. Straightening up, she brushed off the dirt and trimmed the last bit of dangling root. Then, holding the bulb, she swung the knife twice, whacking off most of the lacy top of the fennel plant. As she tossed the bulb into a black plastic crate, she was already looking for the next one.

"I had no idea what we'd be doing out here," Schapper said. "I thought I'd be crawling on the ground picking strawberries. So, this is great!"

This Saturday will mark the start of Ag Against Hunger's new gleaning season, in a field near San Juan Bautista. No word on what the crop will be, but volunteers can be sure of harvesting satisfaction, knowing they are helping to feed hungry families.

Gleaners salvage lettuce, broccoli, onions, celery - whatever is left in the field after the harvest before the tractors roll in to till it all back into the soil.

Whatever is gathered will go back to the Ag Against Hunger coolers in Salinas. Within a couple of days, it will be on trucks going to food banks as far away as Sacramento, though most of it will stay here in Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties.

Last year, according to Ananda Jimenez, who coordinates the

gleaning for Ag Against Hunger, gleaners picked and gathered more than 120,000 pounds of fresh produce that went to food banks instead of getting tilled into the soil.

"We really need to give more to the food community that supplies food for the needy because I know there's an increasing need," said Schapper, who will soon be a supervising nurse at Salinas Valley State Prison after working at Natividad Medical Center for 27 years as a nurse manager.

"Lots of employees I see are really hurting. They have to hit the food banks to make ends meet."

It would be hard not to see the need, she said. "It's in the media, it's in my workplace, it's in the neighborhood, it's everywhere."

Food banks in the area estimate that as many as one in four families runs short of food sometime during the year. One in seven gets some kind of food aid.

The economic downturn has meant the Food Bank for Monterey County fed 54 percent more households in fiscal 2007-08 than it did the previous year, and in the last six months of 2008 it served

7,000 more households countywide as compared to the last six months of 2007 - 29,000 total - in just one program, the Emergency Food Assistance Program.

So Schapper and other gleaners give up a Saturday morning to help provide fresh produce to food banks. Young and old, some in a group from a church or high school, some alone, all work together to make a difference.

"We all have some responsibility," says Schapper. "I had some time on my hands. I figured it was a way to give back to the community, and it wasn't going to cost me anything except time. And, why not?"

A life of gleaning

Schapper, 65, is no stranger to farm work or to gleaning. She grew up on a farm near Cedar Rapids, Neb., where the family grew most of their own vegetables and raised chickens and a few pigs.

Money was tight, says Schapper, and from an early age, she and her siblings did what they could to help out.

During corn harvest, that meant gleaning.

"We'd always go out and pick up corn in the fields in the evenings," Schapper remembers. Neighbors would let them go into the corn fields before they put the cows in it to graze.

"We had an old car that we took the back seat out of," says Schapper, "so we just piled the corn in there."

There were always a few ears that had been left on the ground. "We'd pick 'em up in 5-gallon cans, because that was about all we could carry. Then we'd go dump it in the car." On a good day, she recalls, "it'd come up to about the windows in the back." Several bushels. Then her father would drive the car to the grain elevator and get it weighed.

But while the three older children were in the field gleaning the corn, they were on their own. Their father would drive the car to the edge of the field and leave them to it. "We were allowed to move the car forward in the field," she says, as they worked their way across acres of corn rows.

Just 10 and 11 years old, the sisters were too small to drive the car alone, so one would steer while the other pushed on the gas. Once, remembers Schapper, the car just rocketed out of control.

"We started really just zooming across the ridges in the corn field. My brother had to get out of the back seat and turn off the key. He was about 6 years old at the time. And he had enough common sense to do that." Schapper laughs at the memory.

Gleaning was a way of life for a farm family struggling to make ends meet. Berries, cherries, anything they found to supplement the food they grew and what they could barter for.

"To the day my dad died," says Schapper, "he was out picking choke cherries at the side of the road. So he was a gleaner from day No. 1 until he was 94."

Schapper may have left the farm, but she didn't leave that gleaning tradition behind.

Additional Facts

TO HELP

Ag Against Hunger will hold its first glean of 2009 on Saturday in San Juan Bautista. Meet at 9 a.m. at the post office in the Windmill Shopping Center in San Juan Bautista. A post-glean barbecue will be held at 11:30 a.m. at San Benito High School's ag building, at the corner of Monterey Street and Nash

Road in Hollister.

RSVP by Friday to ensure there are enough people to glean and so Ag Against Hunger can provide sufficient water and breakfast snacks. RSVP/information: Ananda at ananda@agagainsthunger.org or 831-755-1480.
