

Noozhawk Talks:

Evelyn Jacob Cooks Up a Labor of Love

By Leslie Dinaberg, Noozhawk Contributor

Whatever the obstacles, Food From the Heart founder and her commando cooks find joy in feeding those in need

Offering comfort food to those in need has been part of Evelyn Jacob's routine for the past 15 years. As founder of the nonprofit Food From The Heart, she and her team cook nutritious, high-quality meals and give them out free of charge to people facing a crisis in their lives.

Leslie Dinaberg: How did Food from the Heart get started?

Evelyn Jacob: Fifteen years ago I was one of the owners of the New York Bagel Factory, bringing bagels to Santa Barbara for the first time. After being in business for 17 years, we were lucky enough to sell our business and I was suddenly without a job. I thought, what would I like to do?

I love to cook and I went to what was then called AIDS Project Central Coast and I said, "Do you have any people who are too sick that I could just cook for?" And they said, "Wow, that would be amazing." So they gave me 15 people and I just started cooking at my house and once a week bringing them food.

Then they called and said "we have another five

people, we have another five people" and pretty soon I had 25 people that I was cooking for, and a couple of friends came over and gave me a hand. We cooked out of my kitchen for a while and then we decided we needed a larger space ... At that time my kids went to Santa Barbara Middle School and St. Anthony's Seminary was up there and they said we could use their kitchen, so we moved our operation.



It's kind of like when you put fish in a pond: the bigger the pond, the larger they grow. ... More and more volunteers came, and then Julia Child started coming on occasion to help, and so word got out about that and more volunteers came.

... After about five years, that kitchen became unavailable ... the next spot became First Presbyterian Church and we were there for nine years. When we moved there, Robin Monroe, a volunteer, became the head chef and she started doing the menus so I could focus on fundraising

and getting awareness out about us.

Pretty soon we outgrew that facility and so the wonderful people at Trinity Lutheran Church came forward with a great kitchen for us. ... We've been there over a year and it's just worked out perfectly, and they are so, so kind to us and happy to have us there. We serve 100 people once a week; we deliver a big bag of food to them each week. We also make food for Sarah House once a week and serve about 25 of their clients and staff.

LD: That's nice to give them a break.

EJ: Exactly. Then we started doing a fundraising appeal because we were at the point of having no money at all ... and in walks the Public Health Department carrying an article about us, and what they found was that the church kitchen never had a permit.

... Our kitchen was nominated the cleanest kitchen of the year from the Foodbank so we were a spotless facility, but we didn't have the right sink configuration.

They just came in and said, "You can't even use it." And we said, "What about a grace period" and they said "No. You are done here." Well, moving our whole operation ... these are people who can't just go to the store and go buy food; they are homebound, they are in need, they don't have family that can cook for them, and they don't have friends who can take care of them. If we don't come to their door on Wednesday with a bag of food, they are waiting at their door. They don't have anything. So we had to scramble. We did miss one week because we had no choice and nowhere to go.

Everyone called the Health Department and complained on our behalf and ... I must give them credit because they stepped up the permitting process and rushed our plans through. They are working with us to get us back in our kitchen as fast as possible.

LD: What have you done the last couple of

weeks?

EJ: The Community Kitchen at Casa Esperanza. We cook there late at night when they're not using their kitchen and then the next day we transport it to either the Earl Warren Showgrounds or the First Presbyterian Church, where we put it in the bags and the drivers pick it up. There are about 25 drivers who deliver between Carpinteria and Goleta.

LD: And when you're at the church you can do all that at the church?

EJ: Yes, we can do all of that at the church. Actually, last week at Earl Warren they had that huge tribute for the fallen officer (California Highway Patrol Officer Jarrod Martinez), so we couldn't use it. We scrambled and First Presbyterian Church again stepped forward. We're confident we will be able to continue serving food, and we've had good response from the community with our fundraising.

LD: You're raising funds now to bring things up to code?

EJ: The church (Trinity Lutheran) is offering to pay for the improvements, which is great.

LD: What is the cost?

EJ: About \$25,000.

LD: That's a lot of money.

EJ: We want to get back in as soon as possible. ... But we're kind of commandos — commando cooks — and we are determined that people will get their food, and so far they have. The last couple of weeks we had to simplify our menu but that's all temporarily. This coming week we'll be back to usual.

A number of our clients are under hospice care so there might be somebody with them who might share the food with them ... There's security in knowing that you have food, whether it's in your freezer or whether you know on Wednesdays your driver is going to be there with your bag of food. It

just takes this whole level of stress off of you.

... The drivers have an emotional connection to their people. It's really showing them that somebody in the community really cares for you, and that's something they look forward to.

LD: So your clients are a variety of people?

EJ: Yes, we have some who are just on it for a very short time and we have some of the original AIDS patients who are still on it, 15 years later. ... Our target group are people who are too young to be eligible for other services. They can't get Meals on Wheels ... They can't get on Mobile Meals because of their age, they can't get to Community Kitchen to stand in line and wait for a meal or to go to Catholic Charities to pick anything up. They are homebound and they are the ones who fall through the cracks. There isn't anyone to take care of them.

LD: Is there an income requirement?

EJ: It's just the need. Most of them have very, very low incomes. If they have money they don't feel comfortable taking this because they know that you're taking it from someone else who really needs it.

LD: Do the same people cook every time?

EJ: Yes, it's a wonderfully dedicated group of volunteers. We call ourselves the Food From the Heart Family and our oldest volunteer, and one of the hardest-working friends, is Jo, who's 90. She comes in at 7 in the morning and starts chopping onions. She's just amazing. And then we have kids from the high school who do their community service. We have men and women. We have a base now of over 50 volunteers who come regularly and do different things. ... We work together really well and at the end of Wednesday when you've seen 100 bags go out and get delivered, there's no feeling like that. It's just an extraordinary feeling because you know that these people have food now. They are going to be OK for a few days.

LD: That's really, really nice.

EJ: It scared us when we thought we wouldn't be able to do it and it was coinciding with not having much money. It's always like blessings in disguise that the increased attention brought us some donations and they keep trickling in.

LD: You must feel very satisfied about how this has all evolved.

EJ: I feel really good about it. Really good. We are one of those organizations that use every penny for food. We only have three part-time people on staff and everyone else volunteers. I've been volunteering for 15 years and don't take any compensation. Nobody else is asking for money to do this; they know that it's really a total heartfelt project.

Vital Stats: Evelyn Jacob

Born: Dec. 7, 1949, in Los Angeles

Family: Partner Mindy Rosenblatt; two son grown sons, Joss and Bowie, and a goddaughter, Malia

Civic Involvement: Founder, Food From the Heart; volunteer for Third Millennium Awakening, putting water filters in India

Professional Accomplishments: Successfully raising my children, 17 years of New York Bagel Factory and 15 years of Food From the Heart

Best Book You've Read Recently: Spiritual Power by Mark Griffin

Little-Known Fact: "I have an area in my cactus garden that's called the Brunswick Bed because it's bordered in black bowling balls with baby cacti growing out of the thumb holes."

— Noozhawk contributor Leslie Dinaberg can be reached at leslie@lesliedinaberg.com.

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