

Feeding Farmworkers

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Foraging for food for farm workers was Nancy Costello's life work

By Tom Adams



Monterey County has some legendary foraging sites, from the forests of Big Sur with their chanterelles to Point Piños' shellfish and seaweed. But few know about the foraging possibilities presented by the loading dock behind the Crossroads Safeway in Carmel or the parking lot at Trader Joe's in Pacific Grove.

Nancy Costello saw those foraging opportunities some 43 years ago, realizing that supermarket "sell-by-date" rules mean that every large grocery store in America throws away most of a truckload of perfectly edible food every day. And because of her six day-a-week diligence, Nancy's Project (as her nonprofit corporation came to be called) now provides a weekly shopping bag of food for some 2,000 poor migrant farmworkers and farmworker children.

Costello vehemently objected to being anointed a saint for doing it, and truth be told, few saints have likely had her business-like approach or unwillingness to suffer fools. To her it was simply foolishness that markets were throwing food away while people nearby went hungry; the fact that those hungry people were the same hardworking and underpaid folks who produced that food was beyond foolishness. It was an injustice that needed righting, so she took matters into her own hands.

Costello never let up on this mission until last June, when her doctors made her retire. Five months later, on Nov. 8, she passed away peacefully at home in Monterey. She was 95.

It has taken more than 40 people to keep the project going. But to her great satisfaction during her short months of retirement, Costello got to see that Nancy's Project would outlive her. Volunteers led by coordinator Betty Kasson moved the operation from the Costello family home on Via Cimarron in Monterey to a self-storage unit on Highway 68, and the loading of Costello's flatbed six mornings a week continues, as do the afternoon deliveries to a dozen or so distribution points throughout the Salinas Valley.

Of course, several food programs have sprung up in the years since Nancy's Project started in 1970. But most of those are diverting food from higher up the distribution pipeline. Nancy's Project remains one of the few local charities, along with Ag Against Hunger, that salvage and recycle, intercepting the castoffs of the well-to-do to feed the seasonally working poor.

"I backed into it," Costello said in a September interview when asked how she conceived the idea.

It all began shortly after the end of the legal guest worker program of the bracero era. Cesar Chavez and others had created the predecessor organizations to the United Farm Workers union in the early 1960s. The nationwide boycott of California table grapes, which began in 1965, had raised awareness to a national level of the miserable conditions of some agriculture workers.

In 1970, Costello's husband Jimmy, city editor of the Monterey Herald newspaper, had been assigned a group of summer interns from Stanford, allowing him to expand the paper's coverage and develop a series of investigative articles on conditions in the farm-labor camps then dotting the Salinas Valley landscape. The series documented many cases of farm owners providing workers substandard food, housing and other services.

But, as Costello told it, what caught her eye was one article in the series highlighting a grower who tried to do better by his workers, going so far as to provide their children an aboveground swimming pool. But, the reporter noted, no kids were swimming during the times he was at the camp, explaining that they didn't have shorts to wear in the pool. Having just raised six children, Costello had a lot of shorts in lots of sizes, and so did her neighbors.

The next day she was on the road to the camp with boxes of shorts. But when she got to the camp, she realized the needs of the farmworkers were much more profound than shorts to swim in. Upstairs in the barracks-like camp housing she found just one adult, a grandmother left in charge while the parents worked, and a dozen or more babies, each lying on a bare cot with just a diaper on.

That did it. The next day she explained the situation to a meeting of the League of Women Voters; she returned to the camp with her station wagon stuffed to the roof with clothing and other necessities. Since then, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., six days a week, 51 weeks a year: pack the truck, home for lunch and a siesta, delivery run to the valley. Foraging on a grand scale came to Monterey County.

Migrant farmworkers in the United States do not enjoy the same legal employment protections as other workers, and in various ways their plight has only worsened with time. Figures published by the U.S. Department of Labor show that farmworkers earn an average \$7.25 per hour—less than the minimum wage—and many farmworker families subsist on wages that fall below the federal poverty line.

So over the years, Costello recruited many local institutions to help. Beyond Safeway and Trader Joe's, she lined up nine local churches, two church schools and uncounted individuals to regularly bag dried beans, help load and unload her truck, collect clothes and wrap Christmas presents for kids who weren't going to get any otherwise.

Costello ran a tight ship, ranging from a blanket prohibition on donuts and the other more deadly forms of American dulces to her custom of saving cakes and cupcakes for families having kids' birthdays that week to the fact that the cargo net on the truck had to be anchored down just so.

At the other end of the delivery pipeline, "clients" turned into friends over the years. At her various stops, Costello came to know the families, the number of kids, their special dietary needs, their family histories. She would describe with pride the kids who grew up to get good jobs and start raising good kids of their own. The day the team had to tell one group that Costello was retiring, a woman whose eight children Costello had helped feed for 30-plus years after her husband died in an auto accident said, through her tears, "She was like a mother to me."

Eventually, the local television station KSBW gave Costello its Jefferson Award and even talked her into taking a few days off to go to Washington to be one of the recipients of the national award. She was back in the truck a few days later. Once, when accused of being a saint, she said simply, "No I'm not; I'm a truck driver."

Tom Adams is a senior research director for IHS Inc., which in 2010 acquired Adams Media Research, which he founded in 1993 to track the impact of digital technologies on the media industry.

How to help: To volunteer for Nancy's Project, write to Betty Kasson at betty@kasson.com. Tax-deductible financial donations to cover expenses may be sent to Nancy's Project, P.O. Box 1, Monterey, CA 93942-0001. Contributions of clothes, toys, blankets and other goods may be left at Saint Dunstan's Church, 28003 Robinson Canyon Road, Carmel.