

Julie Yurko

Helping feed neighbors in need as President and CEO of the Northern Illinois Food Bank



Imbued by her parents with a strong sense of community involvement and service, and further inspired by her own experiences to want to give back and help those in need, Julie Yurko found a great fit for her passion — a career in philanthropy culminating in her current role as President and CEO of the Northern Illinois Food Bank. The Geneva-based organization is the primary food supplier for feeding programs throughout 13 northern Illinois counties that serve an average of 570,000 food insecure recipients every month by providing more than 82 million meals a year. Though meeting the growing need is becoming increasingly challenging, Yurko finds the opportunity to serve others to be a true labor of love.

■ You grew up in Elmhurst — what schools did you go to and what were your interests?

JY: I was born in Fairfax, Virginia and we moved to Elmhurst when I was about 3, which is where I lived until I was a sophomore in high school. I attended Roosevelt Elementary and Churchville Middle schools.

I was very involved in music, taking piano lessons, and then picked up the cello in 5th grade, and I continued to play cello through college. Music was always a part of my life, a gift from my grandma who was a wonderful pianist, so I spent a lot of my early years at piano recitals and orchestra concerts.

■ What were your favorite activities?

Any special fond memories, significant achievements, or experiences that had an influence on you?

JY: I grew up going into Chicago, going to Marshall Field's around the holidays and the museum campus. My grandparents lived in Wheaton, which is why I live in the Wheaton area now. The other thing we did growing up, is my maternal grandparents owned a resort in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin. We would go skiing, fishing and canoeing in the north woods of Wisconsin. Also, my parents loved to travel, so we would take a camper out west to visit national parks when we weren't going up to the resort. I had a pretty awesome childhood.

I also remember very distinctly when the

elementary schools in our neighborhoods were combining and I watched my parents advocate on behalf of the school I attended. My parents were also actively involved with the church, leading youth groups and serving. It's from them I learned about public service and actively participating in causes you care about. So to be able to represent an organization and a cause that I care deeply about and connect with people who also care deeply and who would like to give — that's what I believe in, that's the joy of philanthropy.

■ You moved to Washington, DC for the last two years of high school but then returned to the area to attend Northern Illinois University. Anything particular that drew you back?

JY: When I was in high school I still considered myself a Midwest girl, so I was very anxious to come back to Illinois. I had no idea really what I wanted to do. I was average at playing the cello. Bless my parents, they still allowed me to apply to music school. Northern Illinois University has a very strong music program, so I was drawn there. But within about a year and a half, during my sophomore year, I was like, what am I doing? I didn't want to be a music teacher, and back in the late 1980s they didn't have arts administration programs. So I got involved with the honors program at NIU where I worked with a

Q&A / RAPID FIRE

Favorite non-work activities?

I love watching football, reading fiction, and walking trails and paths.

Best and or most influential books you have ever read and books on your nightstand right now?

Well, always the Bible. For work I would say *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni. On

my nightstand now are two books, *Love Plus Work* by Marcus Buckingham and *The Personal Librarian*.

Three words that best describe you.

Definitely optimist, extrovert, and I love to laugh.

Favorite guilty pleasures? Chocolate.

And I've always loved murder

mysteries. For me, working a lot and raising kids, sitting down and watching TV feels like a guilty pleasure.

If you could have dinner and discussion with any four people in history, who would they be and why?

I would have dinner with Jesus, to hear the Word straight from him. And Melinda Gates, Sheryl Sandberg and Oprah Winfrey — because they are powerful women who I admire and I would want to pick their brains.

Best words of advice anyone ever gave you and from whom?

When I was put into this position, a former colleague offered to be my coach. I told her I wanted everyone to be happy. She said, you can't make everybody happy, but you can approach your leadership by asking lots of questions and learning what's important to people. That's been really important and led me to realize the people we really need to be asking questions of are the ones who are coming to use our services.

professor who offered classes in music business and ended up doing an honors capstone program in arts administration and philanthropy. Through that honors program, I got an internship with the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra the summer before my senior year, and that really led me to wanting to work in philanthropy.

■ **After college, you worked at the Chicago Zoological Society/Brookfield Zoo then The Children’s Memorial Foundation (now Lurie Children’s Medical Center). Any valuable lessons learned at any of those early jobs that you carried with you?**

JY: I learned people will give to people who they trust and who show impact. Truly, it’s all about relationships and showing impact. In order to show impact and be true to your promises, you need to be measuring your success.

■ **How did you end up working at the Northern Illinois Food Bank?**

JY: I left the workforce after the birth of my third son because some of my children have special needs and I needed to help get them to the services that they needed. I didn’t know when I would go back to work, but thought it might be maybe seven to 10 years. During the great recession we experienced job loss and had no income coming into the house. By that time we had our fourth child. Thankfully, we had some savings and we were able to stretch our dollars. I was able to enroll the kids on free and reduced lunch at school and the state health care so we wouldn’t lose coverage for my children with special needs. And after about three months, I was like, looks like mom is going back to work.

A dear friend of mine, who had been a colleague at the Symphony forwarded a job posting for a fundraising position at Northern Illinois Food Bank. The job met my criteria of being close to home because of my children, and it was for an organization that provided a basic human need. After having kind of followed my passion in music, I realized I wanted a job that was very much about giving back and serving those who are often marginalized. I applied for the job and I got it. Ultimately, experiencing firsthand the fear of not having enough to support my family awakened a deep, deep passion for this work in me.

■ **What is the Northern Illinois Food Bank’s mission and how is it implemented?**

JY: Northern Illinois Food Bank’s mission is to provide nutritious food and resources for neighbors in need — with dignity, equity and convenience — through partnerships and innovation. Our goal is to ensure everyone in our 13-county service area in both rural and suburban Northern Illinois has the food they need to thrive. Every \$1 donated to the Food Bank, provides \$8 worth of groceries for a neighbor in need and 96% of the Food Bank’s resources go directly to programs that feed our neighbors. We work through a network of 900 food pantries, soup kitchens and feeding programs that serve an average of 570,000 neighbors every month and provides more than 82 million meals a year.

■ **One of the biggest ongoing challenges for the NIFB is growing the network of resources to simply obtain “enough” food to meet the growing need. How is that being addressed?**

JY: The Food Bank has been facing challenging times in the aftermath of the pandemic. We are seeing more neighbors reaching out to our network than ever before which is requiring more resources. Last fiscal year, the Food Bank distributed an estimated 109 million pounds of food, a 10% increase from the prior year. After a record high increase of 30% in 2022, the USDA reports that food insecurity is at the highest level since 2014.

More than 60% of our food is donated from grocers, manufacturers and farmers. Another 12% comes from the government through the USDA. While we are fortunate to receive so much donated food, due to increased demand we are having to invest more in purchased food at a time when food costs are high. Pre-pandemic, we were around 9% purchased food, and now we’ve been up as high as 23%. Fortunately, we have been able to increase contributed revenue to the food bank and we are allocating significant portions of that to purchasing more food. But that may not be sustainable.

■ **What percentage of food recipients being served by the food bank need ongoing assistance, and how does the Food Bank define ongoing need?**

JY: We believe if neighbors visit a food pantry or program more than 12 times a



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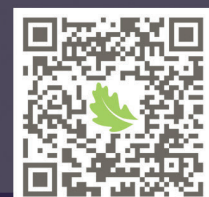
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year, that's a sustained need. Around 64% of households in our network visit a food pantry or program one to three times a year, while an estimated 20-30% of food-insecure households face prolonged challenges requiring long term assistance. For these neighbors, federal programs and Northern Illinois Food Bank and our network provide a critical lifeline year after year.

■ **The other key component of the NIFB's mission is to systematically address the implications of the growing need. Looking at just the last several years, how did the jump in inflation affect the numbers of people impacted by food insecurity?**

JY: We are experiencing the largest increase in neighbors being served since 2008. We believe it's due to a combination of factors: inflation and the subsequent rising cost of food, the ending or reduction of government pandemic era benefits, and the living wage gap. The living wage in Northern Illinois is \$37 while the average wage is \$30 and minimum wage is \$14. So even if people are working, many are still struggling to make ends meet.

■ **Among NIFB's major thrusts in recent years has been to humanize the food distribution process and to structure the process around the recipients needs. What does implementing those priorities entail?**

JY: The key is emphasizing that food recipients are neighbors, and we all need a little help now and then. As for structuring the distribution process around the recipient's needs, that starts with addressing the three major reasons that those who are food insecure don't avail themselves of the food bank's services — they're not aware, they can't get there, or they're ashamed to go. We have developed seven neighbor-centric practices to overcome these barriers: providing Nutritious Foods, Offering Choice, being Open on the Weekend, being Open during the Evening, Removing Visit Limits, Removing Quantity Limits and Removing Geographic Restrictions.

■ **Regarding people who are food insecure being hesitant to seek help, there remains a significant stigma for those in need that make the NIFB's work all the more challenging. Why is that and how can that perception be changed?**



NORTHERN ILLINOIS
FOOD BANK PRESIDENT
& CEO JULIE YURKO

JY: I believe stigma exists because we tend to blame the individual for being in a position of need. As we increase our understanding of systemic injustices and as we open our eyes to the reality that things happen in life that have nothing to do with choices we've made — when our hearts are willing to see that, it will help dismantle the stigma. But as humans, we are first judging rather than approaching with curiosity on how this could be happening here in America, in the wealthiest country in the world. How do we address it? We tell stories to show that we have systems that have marginalized populations. We have realities, like the living wage gap that impacts people who have worked their whole lives and made all the right choices, but never earned enough to provide for themselves and their future. We also humanize it by being open and honest about our own experiences, as 50% of our Board has a lived experience with hunger and so does over a third of our Food Bank team. The more we're willing to share, the more others will be willing to share and will see that food insecurity is much more common and pervasive than they ever realized. Let's approach it with heart, not judgment, so that more and more folks — when they're in that season where they need some help — will come and get it. Hopefully, we'll shorten the season and help get people to where they need to be. I don't think people really want to come to us, but let's make it OK when they do.

■ **What aspect of your job do you find the most challenging and/or frustrating**

JY: Since COVID, the greatest challenge is

the increased demand for food assistance. So many neighbors are coming forward and asking for help, which is exactly what we want them to do, but we also strive to serve in a way that honors them. It's one thing when we were serving 300,000 neighbors a month. It's a whole other thing when it's now over 570,000 that are coming to us every month. That's the biggest challenge right now, is wanting to provide a positive experience and make an impact.

■ **You are a self-described optimist. What brings you the most joy?**

JY: The joy is being able to love people. I think of it as a business strategy, which sure sounds like an optimist. Loving the person who's coming and asking for help; loving the team member who joins the food bank and dedicates their lives to making a positive impact; being able to love on our volunteers and our donors who are investing in the work; and seeing how meaningful it is for people because it's meaningful to me.

God's purpose and generosity in bringing me to the Food Bank in 2009 has changed my life for the better. I see that with so many people, whether it is the neighbor who is so grateful for the help, the team member who is so passionate and proud of the work that they're doing, or volunteers who consistently tell me it feels like we're family.

All of this brings me immense joy, because I believe when we choose to do things beyond ourselves, it builds happiness. When we help others, it fills our soul and gives us great joy. And I just love that about this work. ■