



THE FIRST FOOD DRIVES

More than 25 years ago, then-NALC President Vincent Sombrotto brought together letter carriers, the U.S. Postal Service and the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) with the idea of putting on a nationwide food drive. Over the span of its lifetime so far, the National Association of Letter Carriers' Food Drive has collected more than 1.5 billion pounds of food, helping countless Americans when they needed it most.

Since the drive began, letter carriers in every part of the country have worked with family members, friends, other postal co-workers and allies to use the second Saturday in May as a

day to give something back to the communities where we live and serve.

"All of our food drives have been special," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "The fact that this year marks the 25th anniversary of our first national drive makes this one a bit more special."

To help celebrate the 25th anniversary, *The Postal Record* is taking a look back at how the food drive was created and evolved to be the largest single-day food drive in the world.

Valley of the sun

It all began with Phoenix, AZ Branch 576. In 1990, Branch President Mike Crowley appointed John Schwander as the food drive coordinator for the branch's local drive held on Nov. 3. Schwander revamped the process to include TV and radio coverage, and would later arrange for then-Scottsdale resident and "Family Circus" cartoonist Bil Keane to create artwork for the drive. Though many other branches helped feed the hungry through food drives or personal donations, it was Branch 576's drive that planted the seed for the national drive.

During the 1991 Arizona state convention, President Sombrotto viewed a videotape of Branch 576's successful food drive format and liked the idea. He invited Schwander and Crowley to share the concept with the AFL-CIO's Community Services Committee—of which Sombrotto was the chairman—at the labor federation's July convention in Washington, DC.

"Vince said, 'This is a good idea. Maybe we could do something more with this,'" explained NALC's original food drive coordinator, Drew Von Bergen.

Von Bergen, a longtime journalist and public relations professional who had worked at the United Press International news agency and as director of public relations for Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH) before joining the staff at NALC Headquarters in 1988. He had been NALC's P.R. director for a few years when Sombrotto led Postmaster General Anthony Frank and the AFL-CIO's Joe Velasquez into Von Bergen's office.

"Drew, we've got something we'd like you to do," Von Bergen recalled Sombrotto saying. "And that's when Vince asked me to put together a pilot drive with the Postal Service, the AFL-CIO's community service arm and the United Way."

1991 pilot drive

Von Bergen reached out to 10 branches to participate in the pilot drive, picking branches that were spread throughout the country. "I had selected the 10 cities on the basis of branches I was familiar with for having been good at doing public outreach," he said.

He wanted places that would be good for testing, such as the medium-sized city of Louisville, KY, and also Harrisburg, PA, "because Harrisburg is well known in the marketing field



Right and opposite page:
The 10-city pilot drive
was announced in the
September 1991 issue of
The Postal Record.

of consumer products," he said. "It's known as a very good test city."

The 10 branches that agreed to participate were Harrisburg Branch 500; Long Island Merged, NY Branch 6000; Columbus, OH Branch 78; Peoria, IL Branch 31; Louisville Branch 14; Northeast Florida Branch 53; San Antonio, TX Branch 421; Dallas Branch 132; Portland, OR Branch 82 and San Jose, CA Branch 193.

All of the branches Von Bergen reached out to agreed to take part. "I think they all thought it was an honor to be part of the pilot," he recalled. "There were some other branches wishing they could be in it."

Representatives from the Postal Service, the AFL-CIO, the United Way and the 10 branches attended a meeting at NALC Headquarters on Aug. 13, 1991, for an orientation and training session. Also attending were Crowley and Schwander from Phoenix.

"John, I'm having this meeting and I haven't got a clue about food drives," Von Bergen recalled telling Schwander. "You've got to come in here and tell these people how to run the food drive."

Schwander and Crowley showed a video and explained in detail how they put together their highly successful drive. They also offered their counsel to participating branches.

Sombrotto explained the importance of the drive to the NALC Executive Council later that month, telling the group that, if successful, the pilot drive could lead to a more widespread drive the following year and emphasized that such activity was good for

the Postal Service and the union. "It creates a well-spring of good public relations," he said. "It promotes the kind of image we need with the public."

The date of the drive was set for Saturday, Oct. 26. On that day, carriers collected 580,000 pounds of food from postal customers and delivered it to local community food banks. As reported in the December 1991 issue of *The Postal Record*, "Donations far exceeded expectations in virtually every city and the amount collected set local food bank records in several areas."

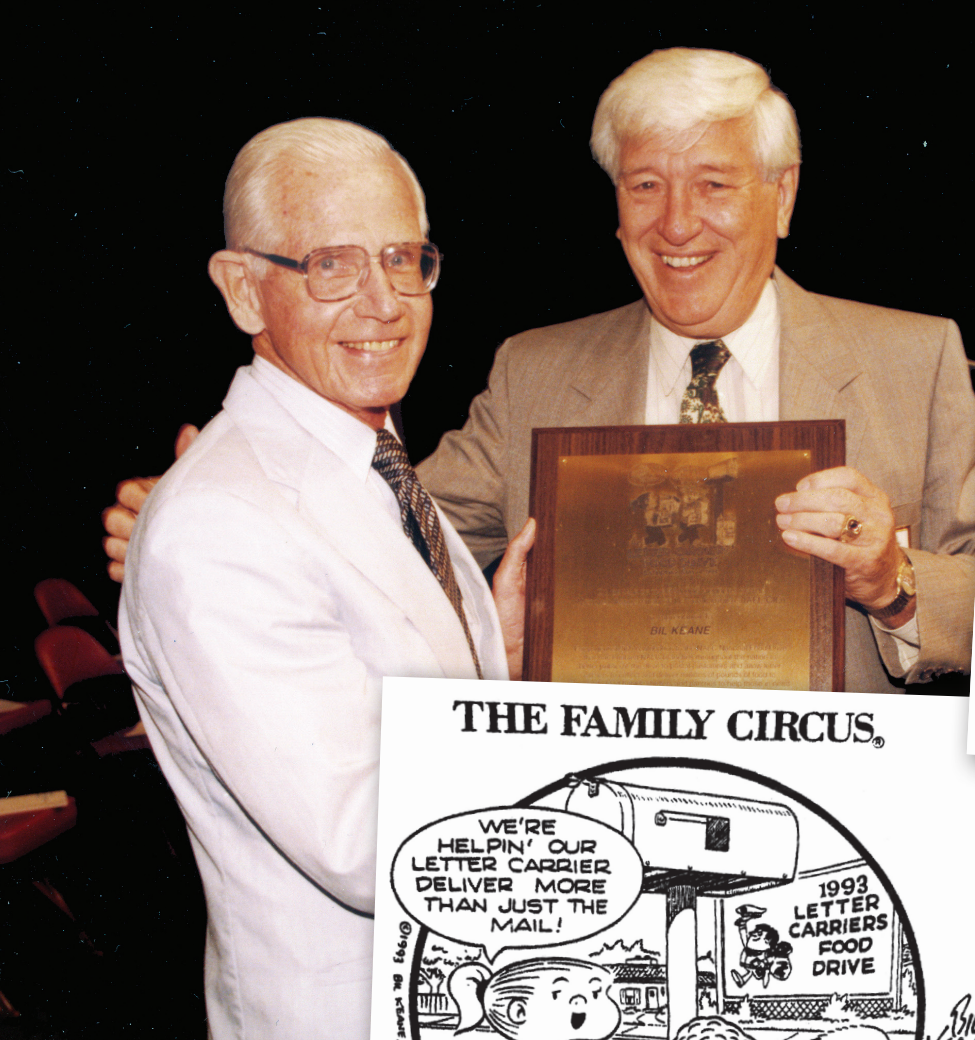
The Long Island food bank said that it was the largest collection in Long Island's history. "Our warehouse is at maximum

capacity," a San Antonio food bank spokesman said.

"It is extremely heart-warming to know that NALC letter carriers were able to fill the food bins to feed the

NALC Director of Public Relations Drew Von Bergen (2nd from r), the original food drive coordinator, organized the 1991 meeting to work out the details for the pilot drive. Phoenix, AZ Branch 576's John Schwander (l) told the attendees how the branch put on its drive.





NALC President Vincent Sombrotto (r) presented cartoonist Bil Keane with a plaque at NALC's 1994 national convention. At right are Keane's Family Circus cartoons for the 1993, 1996 and 1994 drives.

THE FAMILY CIRCUS.



Saturday, May 15



hungry this winter," said Sombrotto in the magazine. "Their satchels may have been a bit heavier and their day a little longer, but I'm sure these carriers know their voluntary community service will help others less fortunate."

"We could immediately tell all the branches were happy," Von Bergen said. "Everyone involved was happy because it was so successful. Now what are we going to do next? We have to take this nationwide."

All 50 states

Following the success of the 10-city pilot drive, NALC decided to aim to

have at least one branch from each of the 50 states participate in the next drive. The union also decided that the next drive wouldn't happen until 1993.

"One of the things we learned from the pilot drive was the feedback from the food banks saying, 'That's great. This has been very successful, but we would really prefer you do this in the spring,'" Von Bergen said. With so many Thanksgiving and Christmas food drives, food banks often start running out of food in the spring. And because it would have been too difficult to turn around and do a drive in early 1992, NALC set the first nationwide drive for Saturday, May 15, 1993.

There also was concern over restructuring underway at the Postal Service, but new Postmaster General Marvin Runyon quickly threw his support behind the drive, as all postmasters general have since.

While NALC leaders set their goal for at least 50 branches—one in each state—they achieved that goal and far exceeded it. Some 220 branches collected more than 11.7 million pounds of food that year.

"Each and every letter carrier who participated in this drive should be proud of a job well done," President Sombrotto said at a press conference announcing the results of the 1993 drive.

This was also the first year Bil Keane produced a “Family Circus” cartoon to promote the nationwide drive. Keane, who lived in the Scottsdale, AZ area, had donated artwork for Branch 576’s drive, probably in 1991. “Anything the letter carriers requested of him, he would have done,” Bil’s son Jeff Keane told *The Postal Record* in 2012. “He moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona, basically because he knew that all he really needed was a mailbox to survive.”

“I called Keane and asked him if he would allow us to use a cartoon on a national basis, instead of just in Phoenix, and he readily agreed,” Von Bergen said. He would ask the cartoonist for a new one every year, and Keane was happy to oblige. “It was clear that he was very interested in the drive and what it did to help people and was very happy that so many branches used his artwork to encourage citizens to donate food,” Von Bergen said.

Keane’s generosity, not just in using the day-of cartoon as promotion, but in letting NALC branches use the image on signs, T-shirts and banners, led to the children characters of “The Family Circus” becoming the faces of the NALC food drive.

“Congratulations to all of you,” Bil Keane told the delegates to the 1994 NALC Convention in Atlantic City after receiving a commemorative plaque from President Sombrotto. “Any of you who did not participate, I hope you will be in it next year. The poor and the hungry need our help.”

That spirit continued even after Bil Keane’s death in 2011, as his son Jeff took over the artistic chores on the cartoon and has continued to produce art for the drive.

‘Stamp Out Hunger’

The food drive continued to grow in the years following. In 1994, the drive was held on May 14, the first time it was held on the second Saturday of the month, as has become the tradition. Nearly 800 branches collected 32 million pounds of food. In 1995, more than

1,100 branches participated, collecting more than 44 million pounds of food. More than 1,200 branches signed up in 1996, collecting more than 44 million pounds again. There was a huge jump in 1997 when more than 1,400 branches collected 73.2 million pounds of food. The explanation for the drastic increase is simple: postcards.

Starting with the pilot drive, almost all of the promotion was left to the individual branches. NALC Headquarters had posters printed and made them available to the branches, but there were no postcards yet. However, at the local level, some branches and Postal Service managers printed and distributed flyers and postcards.

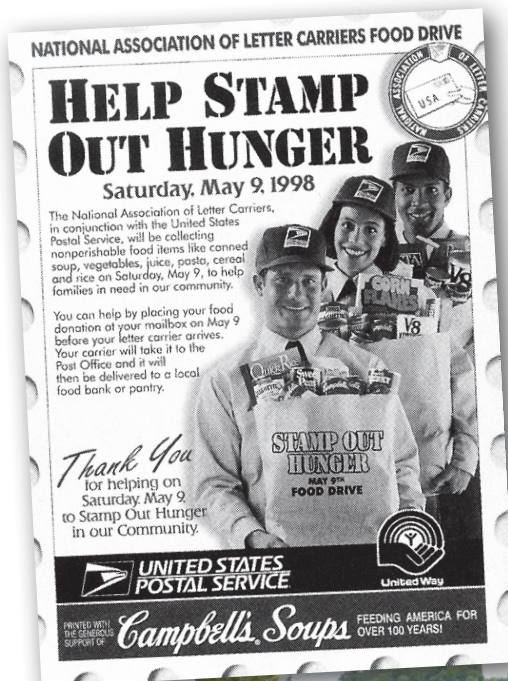
That was the case in the Camden and Cherry Hill areas of New Jersey prior to 1997, where Campbell’s

Soup Company had produced postcards for sending to residents alerting them to the upcoming drive. Von Bergen reached out to the company to see if it would be interested in becoming a national partner, producing postcards for the entire country. The soup company agreed, and the Postal Service allowed NALC to use the special G-10 postage permit to mail them free of charge.

The 92 million full-color cards changed the scope of the drive, magnifying its outreach. “The food drive would never have been as successful as it was without the postcards and other promotions by Campbell’s Soup Company,” Von Bergen said. “This was the largest mailing or one of the largest mailings that was occurring in the country every year.”

The NALC has been fortunate to have the support of national sponsors, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which has been the premiere partner since 2016, to continue the printing of postcards.

It’s worth noting that the early postcards also marked the first national use of the term “Stamp Out Hunger.” At the time, “Stamp Out Hunger” was simply intended as a slogan. However, the design of the logo made it appear that



Above: One of the first postcards to promote the food drive nationwide. Right: The postcards continue to be one of the main sources of publicity for the drive.





the actual name of the drive was the National Association of Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive.

"'Stamp Out Hunger' was not the official title," Von Bergen said. "The official name for the drive was always the National Association of Letter Carriers' Food Drive. We allowed all kinds of slogans, and one of them happened to be 'Stamp Out Hunger.' Over time, people started calling it the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive."

Celebrity support

Whether through the assistance of national sponsors, or through letter carrier persistence, several notable celebrities have been recruited to lend their support for the drive over the years. Spokespeople have included Olympic champions, such as gold medal-winning figure skater Sarah Hughes; the Harlem Globetrotters; and actors, including David Arquette (with then-wife Courteney Cox) and the current spokesman Edward James Olmos. Olmos has lent his creative talents for public service announcements in both English and Spanish for last year's drive and this year's drive.

Representatives for the drive have appeared on "Good Morning America" and the

Celebrities who have promoted the drive include gold medal-winning figure skater Sarah Hughes (below) and actor Edward James Olmos (r), the current spokesman.

"Today Show." For a long time, Ryan Seacrest promoted the drive on his weekly nationally broadcast radio show.

Professional drag racing driver Courtney Force promoted the drive along with other members of her drag racing family. "I asked Courtney what got her involved, and she said that she'd been doing it for years," Von Bergen recalled. "She was so enthused by a drive they had out there and wanted to do more."

The fact that the food collected stays in the local community has been a big part of the drive's universal acceptance, though that had led to some consternation for Von Bergen. He would hear, "There are two food banks in town—which should I choose?" or "This church says they don't want food to go to that church."

His answer was always the same: "Our policy is to try as best you can to spread the food as wide as you can. It's coming in from everywhere; let's try to spread it as wide as we can," he said.

A life (and legacy) of its own

The pivotal figures who helped create the test pilot drive in 1991 have moved on or passed away. NALC

well, such as a pathway for new NALC leaders to emerge.

"Carriers who would never show up at a branch meeting would suddenly get involved," Von Bergen said. Many made the progression from participating in the food drive to becoming the branch coordinator to running for branch office.

"You could look at a list of branch presidents now and see how many of them were food drive coordinators—many of them," he said. "Particularly many women, during an era when women were evolving into more leadership roles, this was a way that they could get involved."

That the drive continues to thrive is a point of pride for Von Bergen.

"We never thought it would get this big," he said. "When we started, I thought, 'This'll be nice and some branches will do it.' But it sure caught on."

"I would say that of all the things I've done in my life, the one that I'm most proud of is the NALC food drive," he said.

As NALC prepares for the 25th national drive this month, it's only proper to reflect on how large the drive has grown and how many lives have been improved because of it.

"Volunteering our time and effort to do what we can to help families on our routes struggling with hunger is something that every NALC member can be proud of," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "It's been a fantastic 25 years, and we've collected more than 1.5 billion pounds of food for local food agencies across the country. That's who we are. It's in our DNA. America's letter carriers, delivering hope." **PR**



President Sombrotto died in January 2013, and Phoenix Branch 576's food drive coordinator John Schwander died a month later. Von Bergen retired from NALC in 2010.

But the food drive continues to thrive. Last year's drive collected a record 80.1 million pounds of food. While the effect in the community cannot be understated, there have been side benefits as