

# Globe Toronto

## From the food bank to the talk circuit

Who better than Daily Bread users to educate the public about the desperate life circumstances of the poor?

BY VIRGINIA GALT

None of this was supposed to be necessary: the media trainers, the speakers' bureau, the new computer system to track every food item that comes in and out of Daily Bread Food Bank.

But, at 21 years old, the food bank is entrenched. Usage has gone up 40 per cent in the past decade, and Daily Bread has become such a landmark institution that some major corporations now use it as a base for employee team-building exercises. (They must book in advance and commit to at least three hours of volunteer work.)

Two years ago, "while still not admitting we're permanent," Sue Cox, Daily Bread's executive director, led the move to a new, permanent location on New Toronto Street in the city's west end, conveniently adjacent to Campbell Soup Co. Ltd., a major contributor, and across the street from "the sugar guys," Lantic Sugar Ltd., which also donates on occasion.

At the same time, with focus-group research showing that the most credible information on poverty comes from low-income people themselves, Daily Bread Food Bank started work in November on a novel public-education project: It established a speakers' bureau of food-bank clients willing to talk about their desperate living circumstances, inability to find decent-paying jobs and struggles to feed their children. Media trainers were brought in to prime them for public appearances and interviews and prepare them for the talk circuit.

Happily, the speakers' bureau has just lost one of its star presenters. Until this week, when he found full-time work as a social planner, Nasir Butt made the rounds talking



Thelma Samuel and Thomas Canning, part of the new speakers' bureau, have been given media training to get their message out.

— with some embarrassment — about his inability to afford proper dental care and a decent haircut.

The impoverished father of five said he did "not feel good" discussing his reduced circumstances — he worked as an agricultural scientist in his home country of Pakistan. But, he said, it was necessary for policy makers and the public to "hear from the people who have firsthand knowledge."

Mr. Butt was one of four food-bank users who presented "the poor people's throne speech" — calling for more affordable housing, more resettlement help for immigrants, better job-relevant training and higher minimum wages — at an in-house media event to kick off a food drive last year. More recently, he has conducted media interviews, hoping to drive home the point that most food-bank users would far rather be earning a living wage than relying on charity.

Before he found full-time work, Mr. Butt had been supporting his family, just barely, through his work as a customer-service associate in a "survival job" at Home De-

pot, where he earned \$10 an hour and worked 10 to 15 hours a week. He stopped using the food bank when he got the Home Depot job, he said in a recent interview, "because other people may need it more than me."

While Mr. Butt has moved on, there is still a roster of a dozen or so speakers available for engagements. These include Thelma Samuel, a student and single mother of two; artist Thomas Canning, whose disability benefits do not stretch far enough to feed him every day; and ligmed Nylogtsang, who was a teacher in Tibet.

Like Mr. Butt, who worked for 15 years at the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council and for eight years with a United Nations community development project in Pakistan, Mr. Nylogtsang was shocked by his inability to find work in Canada in his field. He welcomes the speakers' bureau project as an opportunity to advocate for change.

Media trainer Jon Packer, of The Idea Workshop, has never worked with such a group — most of his cli-

ents are corporate. He provides transit tokens so the speakers' bureau members can afford to travel to and from engagements — primarily radio, television and newspaper interviews to date — and gently advises reporters that, no, they cannot reach the speakers' bureau members by e-mail. Some cannot afford telephone service, let alone computers.

"But by the way they dress, by the way they present themselves, you would never know," said Mr. Packer, who is coaching his new clients — as he would any client — on how to stay on topic and get their messages across, in a sound bite if necessary.

Until now, Ms. Cox and her predecessor, Gerard Kennedy, now the provincial Minister of Education, have been the faces of the food bank. The fresh faces presented by the speakers' bureau are part of a more sophisticated communications strategy designed to break through stubborn public perceptions about poor people.

The speakers are open for engagements at schools, universities

and church groups, and would like to go beyond "speaking to the converted," said Mr. Packer, who is hoping for bookings with business audiences as well. At the very least, he said, they could teach audiences some "valuable lessons about budgeting."

Since it began as a storefront operation on Atlantic Avenue in the depths of the 1980s recession, Daily Bread Food Bank has become so big that "we had to develop higher standards of professionalism; we could no longer be so ad hoc," Ms. Cox said as she led a recent tour through the food bank's vast and highly efficient warehouse, where pallets of food, arranged by category, are stacked to the ceiling.

Corporate donations account for roughly 80 per cent of the "16 or 17 million pounds of food" that Ms. Cox says move through the warehouse in a year. Large shipments of soup, cooking oil, peanut butter — anything the food bank can scrounge or buy in bulk from the food industry — come in and out on a regular basis.

Once a week, Daily Bread's 200

member agencies, housed in church basements and community kitchens across Toronto, place their orders "for, say, a skid of baby formula, a skid of Kraft Dinner, a skid of peanut butter," said Chris Slosser, former manager of research and public education. The food bank's small fleet of trucks delivers the goods. In a given month, he said, 160,000 people in the GTA need emergency food relief.

Last year's survey of food-bank users found that 19 per cent of clients have jobs but do not earn enough to feed themselves or their families. And, among the working poor who use the food bank, "the daily after-ent income per person per household... is \$4.11," according to the food bank's most recent statistics. Shelter is the biggest single expense for most low-income people.

Ms. Samuel, for example, receives \$1,000 a month in social assistance and her monthly rent is \$995. Mr. Canning's disability payments of \$930 a month also fall short. Thankful for the food bank's support, he has become Daily Bread's unofficial artist in residence. His vibrant designs, which sell for up to \$150 a piece, line the hallway into the public sorting area, and he donates half the proceeds to the food bank. "It's my way of giving something back," he said.

It is too early to say whether the speakers' bureau members will get many engagements.

In the meantime, Daily Bread Food Bank remains a going concern. Professional food-handling and safety systems have been adopted in the warehouse and a new computer system is being designed to keep more detailed track of inventory, now valued at roughly \$35-million a year.

Ms. Cox continues to spread the word among her food-industry contacts that as long as Daily Bread Food Bank remains open, it will put to good use anything the businesses cannot sell. Food comes in for any number of reasons, she said. It could be that a shipment of beef-based products was turned back at the border because of concerns about mad cow disease. Perhaps a customer failed to pick up a special order, or a product was mislabelled. Better that it not go to landfill, she said.

"Their problems are out bread and butter."