

Linda Engle Introduction: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host Madison Long and today I talked with Julie D'Agostino, the founder and executive director of Rolling Tomato to introduce the non-profit organization that aims to reduce food waste. In 2023, Rolling Tomato more than tripled the previous year's food recovery record, saving over 216,000 lbs of food which totals over \$380,000. Since its inception, Rolling Tomato has recovered over 416,000 lbs of food.

Could you tell us the backstory behind Rolling Tomato?

Julie D'Agostino: Rolling Tomato was started because I moved to Boise in the fall of 2016 and I really wanted to make myself useful. I looked around for a food recovery service like what I used to volunteer at, Extra Food in Marin, California, and I didn't find anything that was really thriving.

I heard stories about organizations and people that would pick things up, but it was just kind of hodgepodge. But I knew a way to make food recovery work. I did some informational interviews to see if it was a service that was needed, it is. To find out if there was excess food, there was. And I really decided that I should at least make an effort.

Rolling Tomato was one woman, one SUV, one food donor, and one food recipient. I like to think big, but the reality is, it was just me in my vehicle.

ML: According to the United States Department of Agriculture, nearly 30 to 40 percent of the food supply in the United States goes to waste each year. This food accumulates from harvest fall-off, expired items in your home, overstocking at grocery stores, cosmetic imperfections, or excess food preparation at restaurants. To take care of the issue, food waste is usually dropped off in the landfills, which can lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion, and methane production.

JD: Food waste is really just a dumb problem. I pick up perfectly good excess food and a lot of it is produce. That's one of the number one things that I was asked for at food pantries and resident homes and so forth. When we think of donating food, it's shelf stable, canned rice, pasta, beans, those are all great. But really, in order to round out that meal, you need produce. Because we pick up the items and go directly to the delivery to a nonprofit partner, we can do fresh food, we can do prepared sandwiches and salads and all this other wonderful stuff that's healthy, nutritious, fresh, colorful. And that's what we've even continuing to do today.

It solves two problems. It solves the food waste in the landfill to create methane and CO2 gases and help our neighbors, our community members, our food pantries, residential homes. Let's help all those organizations get to the people they're already serving.

ML: According to D'Agostino, Rolling Tomato has now grown into around 30 volunteers, most of whom volunteer by delivering the food.

After getting donations from over 25 commercial kitchens in restaurants, hospitals, caterers, and local farmers' market vendors, volunteers transport the food to over 25 recipient organizations. Such recipient organizations include Boise day shelters, residential homes, and special apartment complexes for those in need. How do you start connections with food donors?

JD: We find food donors all kinds of places. I'll go to food shows, I will ask when I'm at a restaurant, I ask people who are in culinary, "does your kitchen ever have excess food that hasn't been served, hasn't been out?" Maybe they use a lot of mixed greens every month making their salads, but still have some left over. We could take what may seem like a really small amount to them could be a large amount to us. And I just make connections wherever.

We work with Food Donation Connection, which is a clearinghouse for the large corporate entities. We pick up from places like Starbucks, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or Chick-fil-A locations.

ML: Going along with that, how do you match the supply to need without overloading a recipient or letting that food sit in transit?

JD: When we pick up the food, we already know where it's going to. When we start a new route, we'll kind of work with the food donor to say, "is this generally what you think you'll have?" And sometimes they'll say, "well, I only have 25 pounds today, but once this gets going, it could be up to 50 or 75 pounds." That's great for us to know. And then we see, is this going to go to one food recipient organization, or are we going to split it between them? Or if it's somewhere that has a huge freezer and it's all stuff that can easily be frozen, we'll ask them ahead of time. Really what the goal is, is to work out any of the things that could go wrong before we hand the route over to a volunteer.

And then, we adjust accordingly because the thing we don't want to see is having us pick up, drive, deliver, and having go back in the landfill. We've just wasted a whole lot of time and energy. So it's really important that what we get to our recipient partners is the kind of stuff that they want and can use.

ML: What have you learned about scaling restaurant or grocery donations across the Treasure Valley?

JD: Depending on what the food is and where it can go, there have been times where we've had to pass on certain things. We worked with one restaurant and we got, I think, 50 pounds of rice, 10 pounds of vegetables, but nobody wanted it. They'd say, "well I could take a few pounds t It just wasn't a whole lot of nutrition, a whole lot of value. And so we had to say, this isn't the right kind of food for us. Maybe somewhere like a soup kitchen, but it wasn't the right fit for us.

ML: Even during the Coronavirus, Rolling Tomato didn't stop. Food donors became restaurants that were closing down and needed to empty their supply. While originally Rolling Tomato delivered to schools, focus was shifted to the Boys and Girls Clubs in Boise and the residential homes.

Since overcoming various other challenges, what do you think the next step in expanding the reach of Rolling Tomato would be?

JD: We've already had a little growth. We're working with one of our food donors that actually does some deliveries to bring food out of the range of where my volunteers would go. It's about two hours away. And we've worked with this particular nonprofit, it's a community center, senior center, and has the food pantry. We've brought them items when people were going up that way, but we wanted to make more regular deliveries. So by working with a food distributor, they're willing to drop it off, which is fantastic. It's too far for a volunteer to go, we don't have paid drivers.

ML: Do you think that Rolling Tomato could be introduced somewhere like Pocatello?

JD: I don't know the city all that well, but I think it could be. It's just a question of finding potential food donors, connecting up some volunteers that potentially we could train and deputize them to be part of Rolling Tomato.

And then the all important and less fun thing to think about is the record keeping to know who gave us what, what's the value, what's the pounds and where did it go? Because I think that's really important to keep the food donors motivated.

ML: What advice would you give to our citizens who want to help you address the root of the food waste problem?

JD: I would say start at home with your own fridge. Have a shelf or a plastic box that says, "use right away." If you've got half a pepper left, use that pepper in the next stir fry, or when you're making an omelet, it's going to be a pepper omelet. Or chop it and freeze it, and throw it in the soup next time. Shop your pantry, your refrigerator first, and then go out from there.

When you go out to eat, if you don't eat the whole meal, are you bringing half the meal home? And does it have to go to you? It could go to someone else in your family, or maybe you cut it in half when you get to the restaurant and you could give someone the other half of the sandwich. We've been sharing food since we've been on the planet, it's not a new idea. It's just being sensible about a really precious resource that takes a lot of resources to make. So we have to treat it a little bit more like the valuable items that they are. Think about when you go to a restaurant, do you want to go to a place you know that donates food to their local nonprofits or to a shelter? You're voting with your dollar every time you buy something.

Just asking the question, "do you have excess food, what do you do with it," prompts the restaurant staff to say, yeah, that's a good question. What do we do? So there's a little education piece that has to go along.

ML Outro: Thank you to Julie D'Agostino for sharing the creation and growth of Boise's Rolling Tomato. For more information, she suggests going to their website at www.rolllingtomato.org.

From there, you can sign up to become a donor or volunteer as a food runner. If you have questions about the nonprofit organization, their email can be found on our website at kisu.org/sustainableidaho.

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