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Where does L.A.'s leftover produce go? This group helps get tons to the hungry every day

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Jorge Santa Cruz prepares a pallet of produce that will be picked up by a hunger relief organization at Food Forward's Pit Stop warehouse, where about 250,000 pounds of fruits and veggies come and go daily. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

It's 4:30 a.m. on a Tuesday and the lights are blazing at Food Forward's Pit Stop warehouse. Big trucks are lining up waiting their turn while forklifts whiz around the loading dock, pulling pallets of donated asparagus, lettuce and strawberries off one truck or pushing boxes of purple potatoes, green beans and heirloom tomatoes onto another headed to needy clients later in the day.

Everything moves fast at [Food Forward](#) — a nonprofit devoted to redistributing produce that would otherwise go to waste — because fruits and veggies don't last. When you're moving tons of food at the edge of its usefulness — an average of 250,000 pounds or 125 tons every day — no one can afford to dawdle.



Lupe “Papi” Rodriguez uses plastic wrap to stabilize a wobbly pallet of unsold berries, tomatoes and other produce at the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market, before loading it into his truck bound for Food Forward’s warehouse. (Jeanette Marantos / Los Angeles Times)



Mini watermelons are among the wide variety of fruit and vegetables brought into Food Forward’s warehouse. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

The whole point of this hustle is to get food that would otherwise be wasted to hunger relief groups, who get the produce for free and must distribute it for free as well, without imposing any rules like listening to prayers, making donations or joining a club. Food Forward works with some 250 nonprofit groups to get it done, serving 13 counties in Southern and Central California along with seven states and tribal lands when there's too much surplus for regional groups to handle.

So even though it's dark and cold, Food Forward driver Lupe "Papi" Rodriguez is smiling as he gets ready to pick up pallets of unwanted fruits and veggies from wholesale produce vendors. "I enjoy my work," said Rodriguez, who drove a produce truck for 20 years before joining Food Forward in 2021. "It's a beautiful job, because you get to help people too."

And it all started 15 years ago, when [documentary photographer](#) Rick Nahmias was nursing his ailing, elderly dog and a deep disappointment with politics. During their slow walks through his San Fernando neighborhood, Nahmias had lots of time to notice all the unpicked fruit on people's trees, and consider how he could best proceed in helping the world.

The year before, Nahmias had worked hard on two political campaigns, to elect Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president and to defeat Proposition 8, a state ballot initiative to ban gay marriage. Obama won, as did Proposition 8. Although the measure was later overturned, in January 2009 Nahmias was still aching. He and his husband had married just three years earlier, and the vote to ban their marriage "was pretty brutal," he said.

"It felt like total whiplash, and I was so discouraged, I decided, 'I can't deal with politics anymore. I've got to go do something positive.' And Food Forward was my way to turn the other cheek."

It was also the height of the nation's economic downturn, he said. "We were seeing long lines at food pantries, who didn't have the storage to handle fresh fruit. These people were being forced to eat Cup of Noodles when just a mile away there were all these beautiful oranges and grapefruits hanging on trees ... and I was thinking, 'What's wrong with this picture?'"

Addressing that imbalance was all Nahmias had in mind when he put an ad on Craigslist that January, asking for volunteers to help him pick unwanted fruit for donation. Six people responded, he said, but only one showed up at the first event. He persisted, and slowly, a group formed that picked 800 pounds of fruit off his neighbor's tangerine and orange trees, and identified many more that needed picking.

That initial core group — Nahmias, Carl Buratti, Marie Boswell and Erica Kopmar — were all strangers who became close friends, "like a little tribe," he said. For the next nine months they'd gather on weekends, picking fruit and delivering it to local food pantries. They did it to help people and build community, Nahmias said, but also because it was fun.

A community newspaper wrote a small article about their gleaning events, and in October 2009, while he was shopping for a Halloween costume, Nahmias got a call "out of the blue" from Evan Schlesinger of the [Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund](#), offering him a \$25,000 grant to see if his



At the Food Forward warehouse, founder and CEO Rick Nahmias poses in front of a sculptural light display created from old fruit harvesting tools, which the organization still uses to glean unwanted fruit from residential trees. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)



Warehouse manager Leo Paz, right, says it's rewarding to help the community and to get paid for it as a job. On left is Amir Zambrano, managing director of wholesale recovery. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

weekend “fun” could become a sustainable organization.

Nahmias thought the call was a prank at first, but after confirming it was real, the foursome hired consultants to review its viability. The verdict was yes, if they got nonprofit status and a strong leader, Nahmias said. His “tribe” sat him down and said, “‘This could go somewhere. We should do it,’ but when it came to leadership, they all took a step back.”

Thus Nahmias became the founder and CEO of Food Forward, a gleaning operation that distributed unwanted residential fruit to community organizations feeding needy people. But it didn’t take long for its scope to grow.

By 2012, farmers markets were reaching out to Food Forward, asking if its volunteers could help find a home for the produce left unsold. Farmers didn’t want to take it back, but no one wanted to see it thrown away. What began with the Santa Monica Farmers Market has grown to 16 farmers markets in Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

The biggest jump came in 2014, when Food Forward started working with wholesale produce sellers. “We set 300,000 pounds as our first goal, and ended up collecting 4.1 million pounds,” despite working with borrowed trucks and loading docks, and having to coax vendors to trust the food wouldn’t be resold, Nahmias said.

Now, a decade later, Food Forward’s warehouse and its new giant truck trailer, pulled by an electric Volvo-made cab, features a mural by [Brian Peterson](#) depicting its three-pronged attack on hunger: gleaning, farmers markets and its Pit Stop warehouse in Bell, which in 2023 distributed 87 million pounds of free, unwanted produce primarily in Los Angeles County, on a budget of \$6.3 million, or at a cost of 7 cents a pound.

The organization has about 50 employees and 2,000 volunteers. Its new goal — [recognized by the White House](#) — is to collect and donate 90 million pounds of produce this year, and 100 million pounds by 2025. Funding comes from grants and individual donations, “ranging from \$5 to more than \$1 million,” Nahmias said.

Back at the warehouse, Rodriguez disappears behind a forklift to unload his truck as warehouse manager Leo Paz congratulates Karlen Nurijanyan, founder and CEO of [Student LunchBox](#), a nonprofit that provides food and other items to college students living in poverty. The group began in 2020, during the pandemic, and initially, Nurijanyan would pick up produce only from the warehouse’s smaller “Sprout” section, which provides boxes of fruits and veggies to groups too small to use big trucks.

This day, however, Nurijanyan has gotten funding to rent a truck big enough to use the Pit Stop loading dock, and he’s thrilled to be getting his first produce on pallets. During college, Nurijanyan was poor, with almost all his money going to rent. After college he got a corporate job but couldn’t shake the memory of his poverty and embarrassment.

When the pandemic forced him to stay at home, Nurijanyan knew it was time to pursue his dream



Rick Nahmias stands in front of a new trailer that the organization purchased to help with produce pickups. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)



Driver Lupe Rodriguez brings in a pallet of produce he picked up during his early morning route. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

of helping needy college students. Four years later, his group is serving around 4,000 students at 10 universities around L.A. County. The group distributes about 15,000 pounds of food every week, often in open-air “markets” where students can pick the produce they are most likely to eat. Food Forward’s support gave his little organization credibility with other donors, he said, and this year, his program is expanding to include donations of clothing, hygiene kits and other essentials.

This is why people want to work here, said Paz, watching Nurijanyan climb into his rented rig. Paz is all about relationships. He was already working with another hunger relief group when he learned about Food Forward’s growing to work with wholesale vendors. He knew he could have a bigger impact with Food Forward, and his expertise and warmth have helped it grow. Throughout the morning, Paz makes a point of greeting drivers and vendors by name, usually with handshakes that end in hugs.

These kinds of relationships are a large part of why Food Forward has been so successful, Nahmias said, and they must continue for the organization to get the staff and volunteers it needs to grow.

They’re working hard to bring in more volunteers, said Ally Forest, senior manager of community programs, especially those willing to be trained to lead gleaning and farmers market volunteers. People who are curious can participate in the group’s so-called [Zestfest](#) on June 1 at Cal State Northridge’s orange grove, where Food Forward will celebrate 15 years of gleaning fruit by inviting volunteers to harvest hundreds of citrus trees.



Driver Lupe Rodriguez unloads pallets of produce from his truck at Food Forward Produce Pit Stop. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)



Typically, volunteers from Food Forward harvest thousands of trees, including these navel oranges, picked from a Newbury Park backyard in 2020. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

And then, after working nonstop since he began, Nahmias is taking a three-month sabbatical to travel, rejuvenate and plan for the future, since visioning is one of his biggest jobs these days.

“‘Share the abundance’ is not just a slogan, it’s a way of life,” he said. “We need to get people out of their own selfish ways and realize how much they have that they can share. It doesn’t have to be fruit; it could be money, time, love. ... We all have abundance; we just need to find out what it is, and give it.”