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Getting more food to more people: Julie LaFontaine celebrates 20 years leading Open Door

By Ethan Forman | Staff Writer
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Julie LaFontaine is celebrating 20 years at The Open Door, growing the organization into what it is today.

PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo



When Julie LaFontaine first moved to Essex from southern New Hampshire in 1998, one of her first stops “was finding out who was feeding people.”

LaFontaine found The Open Door, and she started volunteering on Fridays from 10 a.m. to noon.

“You quickly learn the stories of people, you recognize the names and faces and it was just really an opportunity to get to know my community by volunteering,” said LaFontaine, who celebrated 20 years of leading as its president and CEO on April 1.

The Open Door started in 1978 as the Cape Ann Food Bank with leadership from Action Inc., Rockport Congregational Church and the Cape Ann Interfaith Commission, according to its website.

As time went on, LaFontaine joined the board of directors, and in 2002, the board turned to her to run the nonprofit full time.

“So it was an opportunity for me to kind of wed my life’s experience with my passion and the rest is history,” said LaFontaine, who had been in ministry with her husband, the Rev. Jim LaFontaine, pastor of Emmanuel Community Church in Essex.

Adapting to the times

Last week, LaFontaine gave a tour of the food pantry's fulfillment center at 28 Emerson Ave. in Gloucester, where volunteers were busy packing online orders. The space had been a place where meals were served before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Open Door pivoted from community meals to producing meals for pickup and delivery, and now serves twice as many meals as it did pre-COVID, LaFontaine said.

"We are able to reach more people, but the piece that's missing is the gathering together and the feeding of the body and the spirit as well," LaFontaine said.

When she took over 20 years ago, The Open Door employed seven people, mostly working part-time, the equivalent of three and a half full-time positions. The Second Glance thrift store was a fledging startup. Today, The Open Door employs 52 people and depends on more than 700 volunteers. (It had more than 1,000 before the pandemic, but pandemic precautions limited volunteers who might be at risk for COVID-19.)

Last year, The Open Door delivered 1.83 million pounds of food, served 1.5 million meals, provided nutrition to 4,176 households, and fed 8,516 people through its pantry in Gloucester, the Ipswich Community Food Pantry and its Mobile Market.

Its fiscal 2022 annual operating budget has grown to \$6.5 million, \$3.5 million in cash operating, and \$3 million in in-kind inventory value, LaFontaine said. The food pantry fights hunger in Gloucester, Rockport, Essex, Manchester, Ipswich, Rowley, Topsfield, Boxford, Hamilton and Wenham.

"I always describe Julie as a 'dynamo' because she is always working on a new project for The Open Door to get more food to more people," said Chris Barker, co-chairperson of the The Open Door board of directors, in an email.

"Julie is a person with bold ambition and drive, and she puts this passion to work for the community," said fellow co-chairperson Kersten Lanes, in an email. "We are working on a capital campaign to double the footprint of our original building at 28 Emerson Ave., and the new design includes a commercial kitchen that will prepare even more meals for Cape Ann."

Growing with the need

One of the first initiatives LaFontaine undertook in 2002 was feeding children eligible for free and reduced lunch at school over the summer. The Open Door was approached by Project Bread about sponsoring summer meals in Gloucester.

"I don't know what possessed me, but I said 'Sure, we can do that,'" she said. "I have approached the work here by saying, 'We can do that,' then figuring out how."

That summer, The Open Door sponsored two summer meals sites. Last year, it operated 12 sites and served 30,300 breakfasts and lunches.

In 2005, the nonprofit launched the Mobile Market to get fresh produce to those in need.

Back then, LaFontaine got in touch with a New York City mobile market run by an organization called City Harvest.

She even volunteered at one of its early mobile markets in the Bronx. She liked how the mobile market built a sense of pride within the neighborhood.

She brought the concept back to Gloucester and now The Open Door runs 12 different markets, visiting both the Lynn and Danvers campuses of North Shore Community College, senior centers on Cape Ann. and elementary schools in Ipswich and Gloucester, along with veterans centers and public housing neighborhoods.

What explains The Open Door's growth over the past two decades?

"What I would say is that The Open Door has grown up out of the heart of the community," LaFontaine said. "People have long supported the mission and that has allowed us to step up and meet the tremendous need like what happened in the last two years with COVID."

LaFontaine said she did not grow the organization single-handedly. "I have a phenomenal senior leadership team, great program managers and you cannot talk about The Open Door and its mission without a huge 'thank you' to the volunteers who have helped fuel this engine over the years," she said.

One of those volunteers is Gloucester resident Ted Costa, deputy director of community outreach for Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, who volunteers in the fulfillment center and delivers meals.

"Julie's passion to serve those in need, while caring for her dedicated volunteers is one of the most remarkable community efforts I have ever seen," Costa said in a text message. "She truly cares and for 20 years she has not lost touch of the changing needs and demands of the community she serves."

Ethan Forman can be reached at 978-675-2714, or eforman@northofboston.com.

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How to help

The Open Door, which operates pantries in Gloucester and Ipswich, says monetary donations may be made online at foodpantry.org or by mailing a check, made payable to The Open Door, to The Open Door, 28 Emerson Ave., Gloucester, MA 01930.

Those wishing to volunteer to pack bags or deliver meals may email helper@foodpantry.org.

The fundraising Empty Bowl TO GO 2.0 will be held Saturday, May 7, from 4 to 6 p.m. at The Open Door, 28 Emerson Ave., Gloucester. At this drive-through event, ticket holders will receive a hand-painted bowl, soup, bread roll, cookie, and a water bottle. The bowl goes home as a reminder: somewhere, someone's bowl is empty. Pay-what-you-can tickets are available at foodpantry.org/empty-bowl.

Or bid on beautiful bowls created by some of Cape Ann's most beloved artists for The Open Door's Empty Bowl TO GO 2.0 online auction at biddingowl.com/theopendoor. Proceeds support The Open Door Summer Meals for Kids and Mobile Market programs. The auction closes May 13.

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