



“What gives me hope is the growing awareness that we need to be less wasteful with food.”

CARLA.

FOOD STASH | VANCOUVER

foodstash.ca | @foodstashfoundation | Vancouver, Canada

After pursuing a career in international development, Carla Pellegrini decided she wanted to make a difference in her own community. As the executive director of Food Stash, she and her team help rescue good, surplus food that would otherwise go to waste, to combat climate change and address food inequities.

Interviewed by **Wilco van Bommel**

Q: What is the story behind Food Stash?

Food Stash started in 2016, when a high school teacher had watched the documentary “Just Eat It”. He was shocked to see how much food was wasted, and felt the urge do something about it. He quit his job, borrowed his dad’s car, rented a basement suite, and filled it with coolers and freezers. With limited resources, he started picking up surplus food at grocery stores and made deliveries to where food was needed most.

This was the start of an incredible journey and growth for us. Today, we have a 4,000 sf facility where our team works hard to rescue and redistribute 100,000 pounds of food each month. On top of delivering our low-cost food boxes, we also host a rescued food market. It’s an affordable zero waste grocery store that is stocked with surplus food from farms, grocers and wholesalers.

Q: How did you get involved in improving food systems?

My background is in international development. I took a job in Kenya, where I managed the logistics of an agricultural non-profit. We delivered seeds and fertilizers to smallholder farmers, and provided financing. This first introduced me to the world of food and the challenges of food insecurity.

When I moved to Vancouver, I was looking for a new opportunity that aligns with my values. I was lucky to eventually stumble upon Food Stash, after first working in the affordable housing space. Working with them is such a cool combo of using my operations skills, while creating deeply local impact.

Q: Why is so much food still wasted? Why haven't we solved this?

There are so many reasons! One is that stores over-order, even if they could know better. For example, around the holiday season we receive about three times as much donated food. Stores just keep purchasing, even when it's clear that consumers aren't buying as much. We provide grocers detailed data on the surplus they produce, but these insights are often not being used to make different choices. It can be frustrating to see that we have accepted wasted food as a fact of life, and our waste disposal systems are too good at making the problem disappear.

The Rescued Food Market welcomes everyone, and educates people about food waste and how to reclaim the value of food.



Photo by Sonal Gupta for The Tyee (foodstash.ca)

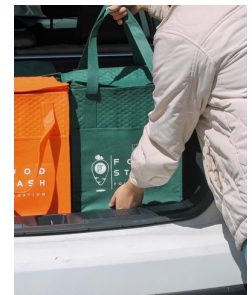
Q: And what about the role of the consumer?

Consumer behaviour has to change too. Right now, how consumers make their decisions reinforces the problems at the stores. An example are 'best before dates'. People treat these as expiry dates, but we know that for example milk is perfectly good for another one or two weeks after the dates. Consumers are picky about aesthetics too. We don't want products with any odd shapes, bumps or bruises. Everything has to be perfect, and this in turn encourages shops to toss away otherwise good food.

At Food Stash, we try to have these conversations with the community and educate people on how small changes in our daily choices can end up making a big difference.

Q: If you were in charge, what new policies would you implement?

Luckily in Vancouver we have a policy that prohibits sending food scraps to the landfill, but there is no requirement to donate food waste, or to track waste data. California and Europe seem to be more progressive with this. California mandated stores to donate their food surplus to local non-profits. This doesn't eliminate waste, but at least it's less wasteful. As for 'best before dates', I think this needs a complete overhaul!



Data is another area where we can do better. You can't manage what you don't measure. I'm not sure if policy can have much influence on how private organizations operate, but if businesses are mandated to publish their food waste numbers, that would perhaps motivate change. It would also be good if grocers pay into a food stewardship program for every surplus food pick-up. A good incentive for them to reduce waste!



Food Stash's fleet of trucks drive 7 days a week to rescue 100,000 pounds of food each month.

Q: What makes you hopeful about the future?

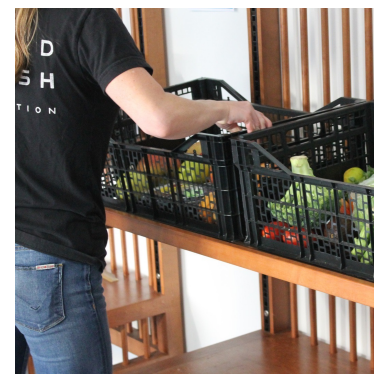
Just in the last month, I've seen four or five articles in the New York Times about food waste. That kind of attention is totally new to me. It makes me so hopeful to see the spotlight being put on the issues, and small non-profits and creative businesses being featured as leading the change. It helps us get the message across that eliminating food waste is an effective way to address climate change and inequity.



Staff, volunteers and residents keep community fridges full of rescued food supplies. People are welcome to take what they need for free.

Another thing that gives me hope is how the younger generation looks at food waste. We work with kids as young as kindergarten, to grade 12 and university students. Their mindset is very different, and they seem fully aware of how much of our food “waste” is perfectly edible. There is definitely going to be a generational shift coming and that will be helpful.

[Photo credits: images are sourced from Food Stash' social media and website]



ABOUT THIS DIALOGUE

In this provocative series on the need for new approaches to food, we question misconceptions about food systems, and discover how ‘frontrunners’ in different regions have successfully challenged outdated food paradigms and behaviours.



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