

America is saving tons of food, thanks to a student volunteer's great idea

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.11.16

Word Count **725**



A worker removes leaves as nectarines get sorted for packaging at Eastern ProPak Farmers Cooperative in Glassboro, New Jersey, Aug. 27, 2013. Photo: AP Photo/Mel Evans BELOW: MEANS Database's Maria Rose Belding (right), co-founder and executive director, along with Grant Nelson, chief operating officer, with their homepage visible on the computer screen in their office. Photo: Ricky Carioti/ The Washington Post

It's an odd problem that is uniquely American. More than 45 million Americans don't have enough to eat, but the country wastes an estimated 40 percent of its food.

The reasons why are complicated. Grocery stores think they could get in legal trouble if they donate food to food pantries that makes people sick. Farmers allow fruit that is safe but ugly to rot because they don't think it will sell. Bananas turn black on all our shelves.

Something Had To Change

The reasons behind this waste, however, didn't feel so complicated to a teenage girl named Maria Rose Belding. On a chilly day five years ago, the whole thing just felt simple. It felt wrong. It felt like something had to change.

At the time, Belding was a volunteer at a food pantry in the town of Pella, Iowa. She had just thrown out hundreds of boxes of expired mac and cheese in front of numerous needy people lining up outside to collect free food.

"We were throwing away all of this food just because we couldn't communicate," Belding, then a freshman in high school, remembers. That frustration would ultimately lead her to develop a groundbreaking technology in the war on hunger.

Saving Tons Of Food

Belding, now 20 and a student at American University in Washington, D.C., conducted years of research. It led her to launch an online network that connects thousands of food pantries in 24 states, allowing them to quickly share extra food that might have otherwise gone to waste. Pantries simply post their leftover food to the program and someone else in the network picks it up and puts it to use. So far, the database has saved two tons of food.

Belding's program is called MEANS, which stands for Matches Excess and Need for Stability. Experts agree that its website can improve communication between food pantries. They also say it can help with the country's huge problem of constant waste.

Food waste "needs to be addressed on multiple levels," said Mathy Stanislaus, an official with the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA is a branch of the U.S government that works to protect human health and the environment. Stanislaus works on ending food waste. He said part of the solution "is wider knowledge of the problem, but also tools [like this] to reduce waste."

Wait! No One Thought Of This Yet?

Even people who donate to their local pantries are contributing to the problem. Emergency food centers have long been the last stop for whatever's lurking in the back of America's cupboards. And so, people donate an endless supply of near-expired creamed corn, beans and Honeybuns. All of these products do one of two things. They expire on the shelf and get thrown out, or they simply fill up the pantry so the food center can't accept any more quality food.

When Belding started researching the idea behind the MEANS database while in high school, she was sure someone had beat her to it. She was wrong.

It took more than a year. It was a year of planning, researching and building program after program along with her co-founder, Grant Nelson. Then in February, the website launched.

Months passed. In May, Belding was sitting in class when she saw one of their early users had posted an item to the site. This was the moment, she realized, when the project would either succeed or fail. A sense of panic seized her when she saw someone was giving

away assorted varieties of canned beans. She did not think anyone would want them. "So we were all anxiously sitting by our computers hitting refresh, and I said, 'Please, someone take this.' And then, it's gone. It just disappeared. . . . The beans had moved."

More Calls To Make

Things then happened very quickly for MEANS. The group now has several computer programmers who are paid through donated money. It even has a few young volunteers whom Belding admits are older than she. The number of members on the site has grown from around 50 larger food banks in June to more than 200.

However there's still a lot of work to do, Belding said. There are still 26 states that aren't yet using her program. There's still the world. Belding said she had more calls to make, and more connections to build.

Quiz

- 1 The introduction [paragraphs 1-2] mainly describes the problem of food waste by:
- (A) listing a number of ways in which food is wasted
 - (B) indicating the number of people who use food pantries
 - (C) pointing out that many states are using the MEANS program
 - (D) suggesting that there is a communication problem
- 2 What is the MOST likely reason why the article includes the fact that some of the volunteers are older than Belding?
- (A) to show that most volunteers in the program are elderly
 - (B) to emphasize Belding's youth
 - (C) to show that even young people can lead with great ideas
 - (D) to show that the MEANS program is diverse
- 3 Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "groundbreaking" as used in the sentence below?

That frustration would ultimately lead her to develop a groundbreaking technology in the war on hunger.

- (A) innovative
 - (B) significant
 - (C) established
 - (D) complex
- 4 Which paragraph from the section "Something Had To Change" helps you understand the main reason why Maria Rose Belding believed the food pantries were wasting food?

Answer Key

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Paragraph 4:

"We were throwing away all of this food just because we couldn't communicate," Belding, then a freshman in high school, remembers. That frustration would ultimately lead her to develop a groundbreaking technology in the war on hunger.