

# Providing food for the hungry

*Executive Director Thomas Ferraro leads Foodlink, which distributes 7 million pounds of food a year*

By JANICE B. PIETERSE

**T**ractor-trailers unload into the sprawling Foodlink Inc. warehouse along the Genesee River. Church vans come and go. People wait with order slips at a window, bundled up and exchanging cheery banter on a gray December morning.

It feels like a bustling business—and it is. One piece is here on Exchange Street, where more than 7 million pounds of food a year are collected, sorted and distributed to the needy.

The newer pieces of the Foodlink operation—a catering service for schools and day care centers and Freshlink Farms, a wholly owned subsidiary in Penfield that operates a hydroponic greenhouse selling local produce—are where Foodlink executive director and founder Thomas Ferraro started small, revenue-producing businesses as part of his effort to tackle poverty rather than simply treat one of its symptoms: hunger.

Executives in the national food bank system say Ferraro may be the only leader with such an entrepreneurial, pioneering bent.

Ferraro, 60, gives a tour of the city site, where Foodlink moved from a former Wegmans Food Markets Inc. building on West Avenue to make room for expansion in 1999. Since then, Foodlink's annual budget has grown from \$1.7 million to \$5.5 million.

Groups busily check for defects on cans, boxes and bottles pouring onto a conveyer belt from the tractor-trailers into the building, a former paper company. In another cavernous room, people sort boxes with



various arrangements—vegetables, canned meats, condiments. Hallways and freezers are stacked with pallets of peanut butter, bread, ketchup, complete turkey dinners, Cool Whip—even something called “ham, egg and cheese twister croissants.”

It all started almost by accident, and Ferraro marvels at how he would never have seen himself managing such an endeavor.

A Rochester native who graduated from Gates-Chili High School, Ferraro took an early job for the city of Rochester after earning a bachelor's in business at Fort

Lauderdale University. His work with the city included helping plan redevelopment of the public market in the early 1970s.

After a few years with the city, Ferraro joined Action for a Better Community Inc. He appeared on the 1970s Eddie Meath show asking for food to put together some holiday baskets. A call came the next day.

“An English muffin distributor had seen me, and said, ‘Come out to the regional market at 5 a.m., I’ll give you all the bread product you could possibly use,’” Ferraro recalls. “I showed up in a beat-up economy station wagon, and there on the dock was somewhere over 250 trays of bread product. I’ve been in over my head ever since, pretty much.”

Rochester retiree Irving Fierman chuckles admiringly when he talks about Ferraro, whom he sees as a benevolent wheeler-dealer. Fierman, involved in a number of local charitable groups, donated some canned vegetables to Foodlink 20 years ago and saw Ferraro for the first time.

“A year later I found him near the public market, trying to hustle to get a used refrigerator,” Fierman says. “From there, Wegmans gave him his first store. All of a sudden he got this huge place donated by Kolko Paper. His refrigeration unit now must be larger than my house. I’ve taken friends through there. They’ve become donors. Everyone’s impressed when they go through that place.”

## CLOSE-UP

### Thomas Ferraro

**Title:** Executive director, Foodlink Inc.

**Age:** 60

**Education:** B.S., business, Fort Lauderdale University, 1970

**Family:** Wife, Regine Calvar; three sons: Michael, 30, twins Philippe and John, 8

**Residence:** Rochester

**Quote:** “Being able to deal with the farm and some of the things that we’ve done is what’s kept it fresh for me and kept it fun. Because it does get rough, being around people in misery all the time.”

Running the food bank is one—albeit big—part of Ferraro's role. He sees the Foodlink farm and kitchen as small but potentially important entrepreneurial pieces that can help grow the local economy by using local produce.

He also wears an advocacy hat, working to connect small New York farmers with new markets, such as schools. The University of Rochester and McQuaid Jesuit High School both are buying from regional farmers due to Foodlink efforts.

Ferraro also speaks out on issues such as the federal Farm Bill of 2007. He was among a few representatives from New York agricultural trade associations and growers who stumped with Sen. Hillary Clinton in Iowa two weeks ago. Clinton has advocated more federal support for regional growers and finding ways for them to enter large markets such as New York City. Ferraro says such support could help local economies rather than massive, international corn conglomerates.

"He's not afraid to take a shot at some new venture and make it successful," says Clem Eckert, president and CEO of the Food Bank of Western New York Inc. in Buffalo. "I'm not just saying it; he has been an inspiration to the food banks in New York State."

Ferraro had no idea he was starting a food bank when he began working on ways to distribute food after receiving that first load of muffins 30 years ago. But the Rochester native did see an opportunity in using food surpluses that producers or stores might otherwise throw away.

As he contacted more corporations for donations, the companies suggested Fer-

raro get in touch with others around the country who were trying similar projects. A network began to grow—it now includes 205 food banks covering every county in the United States.

Ferraro and others worked out systems in which they could exchange surplus products to offer a variety of foods in their own regions. For instance, Ferraro could trade formerly Rochester-made French's mustard for bread with the food bank in Buffalo.

He established a relationship with Wegmans early. Foodlink now handles most of the requests Wegmans receives for regional food donations. The agency takes three to five truckloads of Wegmans products each week. Foodlink also transports produce from farms across the region to Rochester markets, such as Wegmans.

"Tom's persistent passion for helping those in need is undeniable," says Mary Ellen Burris, Wegmans' director of consumer affairs. "He innovates with changing times and serves our community so well."

Foodlink employs 50 people at wages averaging \$12 an hour, with roughly 20 working for the farm and catering businesses. Ferraro notes no one earns less than \$10 an hour, and many workers might not qualify for employment otherwise because they do not have enough skills.

"The essence of it is, over a number of years we finally learned that hunger is a symptom, it's not the problem," Ferraro says. "And that you can't really beat hunger back by feeding it. You can abate it, but you're never going to turn it around. Like many other people, I think you get frustrated that you're not making headway in what you're

devoting your time and attention to."

Through its businesses and advocacy, Foodlink could help create wealth, jobs and opportunities for people, Ferraro says.

Eckert says he is not aware of any food bank in the country operating like Ferraro's, which is finding ways to earn revenues through catering and the farm. The catering business alone netted \$43,000 in 2006.

"It's extremely unusual," Eckert says. "Our biggest problem is to raise money and get support. What Tom has done is go into new ventures to generate capital and be successful. We all give him an awful lot of credit for that. That's a brand new concept."

Eighty-five-year-old Rosa Wims helps with paperwork a few hours a day at Foodlink. Wims had retired from what is now the Rosa Wims Family Wellness Center, a facility she founded, when Ferraro invited her to join the staff several years ago.

Wims had first come in contact with Ferraro when she obtained food for a soup kitchen at the wellness center. She remembers wondering what was behind his energy and enthusiasm.

"I just had to find out about him from others," Wims says. "Because I didn't want to just ask him brazenly, 'Are you a Christian or what?'"

Getting to know Ferraro—as Wims describes it, like family at this point—she has been impressed with his wisdom and openness.

"He sits down and he will listen," Wims says. "If he feels it's something (Foodlink) needs and can use, he will do it. He will go ahead and accept the challenge."

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