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LI CARES AND SANDY CHAPIN Keep Alive Harry's Passion to Feed the Hungry

By Maureen Traxler

Harry Chapin, Long Island's singer-songwriter-activist who died tragically too soon in a car accident 25 years ago, planted the seeds of compassion that would make it possible for so many people to achieve one of the basic necessities of life - having enough to eat. Before his life was snuffed out, Harry founded a small nonprofit organization called Long Island Cares, Long Island's only food bank. At the start, Long Island Cares served just three agencies, distributing food to feed the hungry. Today, Long Island Cares -The Harry Chapin Food Bank works with local and national food donors, from wholesalers, packers, retailers and growers to government agencies and food drive participants, to collect, store, track and distribute over four-and-a-half million pounds of food and household goods a year to emergency food programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

"I liken him to a tornado of activity and energy," says Lynn Needelman, executive director of Long Island Cares, who knew and worked with Harry in the performing arts industry before joining the food bank staff. Needelman explains that Harry truly believed that "hunger is an obscenity, and hunger in America is the ultimate obscenity." He was a mover and a shaker, and always "saw the big picture."

"He encouraged you to dream a dream and find a way to make that dream happen," Needelman remarks. "He would say, 'Don't walk away from your dream, this is how we are going to make it happen.' He was a master of that craft."

A social activist, Harry Chapin recognized the plight of hungry people in poverty-stricken areas around the world. In 1975, he helped found World Hunger Year, which raised \$350,000 in its first year to aid famine victims. But he soon began to realize even the land of plenty, America, had people who didn't have enough to eat. Therefore, says his partner and widow Sandy Chapin, Harry focused his attention on Washington D.C. He met with President Jimmy Carter, and began to lobby Congress to establish a U.S. Commission on Hunger.

"Nothing was beyond Harry when he felt so passionately about an issue," says Sandy Chapin, adding that Harry would go to Capitol Hill and "hang out in the men's room with his guitar. When a Congressman would come in, he'd play a few chords, introduce himself and go on" to make his pitch. Success came, and after a special resolution was passed, Harry sat on the Commission, which led him to take a look at Long Island's needs. Working toward a solution, he noticed that a feed-the-hungry organization called Second Harvest was burgeoning out from Arizona to 12 other states, and he lobbied through the New York State Good Sam Bill to establish a food bank on Long Island.

Harry founded Long Island Cares in 1980. His widow Sandy says he began going out to various community leaders; he sought business and church support, and asked for letters of testimony. The food bank opened its doors in February, 1982, six months after his death. Although he was sorely missed, he had inspired others. Needelman recalls his encouragement when she was overwhelmed by the task at hand. Harry said: "Don't worry about ending world hunger, but know you can end one person's hunger."

She notes that Long Island Cares is the only food bank on Long Island, and delivers food to over 600 local food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, day treatment facilities, senior nutrition sites and day care centers. These agencies, in turn, distribute the food to their clients and/or provide meals from the food received.

Long Island Cares creates a weekly menu of foods based on its current inventory, makes it available to agencies online and by fax, and agencies place their orders. Mapping the Island into four sections, Long Island Cares' trucks deliver food twice a month. If an agency requires resources more frequently, it can request to make pickups at Long Island Cares' warehouse.

A recent study of emergency food programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, commissioned by Long Island Cares and Island Harvest, Long Island's two members of America's Second Harvest, the nation's food bank network, found that almost 260,000 residents, including nearly 93,000 children and 39,000 senior citizens, are hungry. During the past four years, increases in the number of clients have been reported at more than two-thirds of food pantries, 54% of soup kitchens, and 32% of shelters.

Long Island Cares recognizes common threads of people in need. "We see trends," comments Needelman, such as a growing number of working poor, a rise in the senior citizen population, and children who don't have enough to eat. Sandy Chapin agrees: "It's not always the same people or the same kind of need, and there's always going to be people in short-term emergency." Needelman emphasizes, "Everyday is different. There's always people on the fringe, and resources are redirected," especially during disasters, like earthquakes and

even 9/11.

In the tradition of Harry Chapin's profession, Long Island Cares is the beneficiary of a number of rock concerts where music lovers bring canned goods as their admission donation. Director of Development Robin Amato notes that the nonprofit also holds its annual Harry Chapin Humanitarian Award Dinner and a golf outing in the spring, and works hard at applying for grants to raise funds to pay for rent, lighting, trucks and fuel.

Amato calls people's attention to the nonprofit's Check Out Hunger campaign, a collaboration with Long Island supermarket chains that runs from October 1 to December 31. At the checkout counter, interested shoppers can choose a \$1, \$3 or \$5 coupon and a cash donation in that amount is scanned onto their order. 100% of that donation goes directly to Long Island Cares to feed the hungry. Long Island Cares thanks its many volunteers who visit the 118 supermarket locations throughout the Island to restock the coupons and interact with the store managers. They help make this campaign possible.

"There are many organizations on Long Island vying for the same dollars," says Amato, but she adds, "Long Island Cares' message is simple. People understand it and are very generous."

Food drives are "something everybody can do," remarks Needelman. Long Island Cares' largest food drive is the National Association of Letter Carriers Food Drive in May, which supplies a vital source of canned and dry donations. Needelman notes that the drive falls just before school ends- a important fact, since during the summer months, the number of children served increases by 38% at food pantries and 36% at soup kitchens.

While Harry Chapin was very vocal in his commitment to ending hunger, Sandy Chapin focused on the changing dialogue from "charity" to "raising self-reliance." She believes that Long Island Cares has to be a multi-service organization to make a difference and that people need to be given the tools to better their lives.

In addition to providing food, Long Island Cares offers various workshops that make a difference. Among them:

New Paths to Achievement assists low-income, head-of-household women in gaining self-esteem and vocational skills needed to become self-sufficient and independent of public assistance.

Long Island Cares' Job Training Program targets at-risk high school students and young adults and provides on-the-job training at its offices to assist participants in gaining clerical, computer and warehousing skills.

School Tools works in partnership with corporations and individuals to collect and distribute new school supplies to member agencies, and

Kids Café, an after school program, provides safe and convenient environments where at-risk children can receive nutritious food, and engage in tutoring and mentoring, homework assistance and recreational activities.

Hunger 101, an interactive, role-playing workshop for ages 12 to adult, raises awareness about the problems of hunger and poverty.

Long Island Cares has brought this well-received workshop to schools, community agencies, faith-based organizations and businesses. The nonprofit also provides nutrition and wellness workshops and disease specific workshops that address prevention and management of various conditions from a nutrition standpoint.

Sandy Chapin credits Lynn Needelman with "pulling it all together. She has a gift for that." Chapin sees Long Island Cares as an organization where warehouse workers sit with the front office staff, and there are job crossovers. She also believes that "Harry would be proud that we've done so well in the area of building self-reliance."

Harry's strong social and political activism dovetailed with his belief in volunteerism, and unpaid volunteers play a large role in emergency food programs across the Island. Statistics show current volunteer numbers as 89% of soup kitchen staff, 90% of food pantries and 54% of shelter staff. Half of all food pantries and 59% of soup kitchens have no paid staff at all.

Sandy Chapin, chairman of the board, notes that Long Island Cares' Board of Directors grew out of volunteers with the organization, and adds, "that's part of why we are so grounded." She says she's seen board members driving the Cares' trucks. "It's very exciting to me."

For his service, Harry Chapin was inducted into the Long Island Volunteer Hall of Fame by the Long Island Volunteer Center in 2003. The Volunteer Center plans to install benches commemorating its inductees at Bethpage State Park. This past August, the inaugural bench was installed in honor of Harry Chapin and affixed with an inscribed plaque.

"Harry truly communicated his passions to people, especially through his music and songs," remarks Sandy Chapin. "It's great that his work has not only survived, but thrived."

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