

North of 50°

LOCAL LATITUDE, GLOBAL ATTITUDE

October 2010 Vol. 8, Issue 10



**BOUNTIFUL HARVEST:
OKANAGAN GLEANERS FEED THE WORLD**

**I AM WOMAN: IS THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT STILL
RELEVANT TODAY?**

Publications Mail Agreement 41188516
ISSN# 1710-4750



OKANAGAN GLEANERS

Story & photos by Lisa Harrison



“IT’S A HUNGRY WORLD—you feel like you’re doing something very necessary here,” says Joel Vander Kooi, one of the 65 volunteers at the Okanagan Gleaners in Oliver, B.C. this morning. He is part of a group from Calgary who have come for a week to prepare vegetables for soup mix that will feed people around the globe. In the evenings, Joel, his family, and dozens of other volunteers sleep beneath the plum trees in the orchard.

“In one week, we’ve been told we’ll make nearly 200,000

Above: Full-time plant manager, Eugene Unruh (top left) donates his time to the Okanagan Gleaners. Thirteen year old Benjamin Vander Kooi (top right) is a 4th year Gleaners participant!

Left: Esther and Juerg Salzgeber (forefront), with Engilina Vanlaar (background)

meals,” Joel continues. “On the map in the break room, you see photos of some of the people who have received the food – smiling faces from people in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Haiti and other places. We’re waiting for a truckload of soup mix to get into Haiti but customs officials want bribe money. It’s crazy. Anyway, you just keep on keeping on and it gets there

eventually.” Not even corruption can dampen his buoyant spirit as he continues peeling piles of onions. Young children help by delivering pails of fresh water to the worktables. For four hours, cheerful conversation never distracts the group from their task.

Since 1996, when the Okanagan Gleaners completed their first batches of soup mix and dried fruit, they have produced nearly 40 million meals for people in 55 countries. Last year was their most productive to date: 7.2 million servings. The



Gleaners' achievement is all the more remarkable because it is accomplished entirely with donated produce, equipment and labour. Even the full time plant manager with a young family is a volunteer.

Bob Ellis, one of the founders of the Gleaners, reveals that the operation was, and continues to be, a leap of faith.

"There were 10 of us who started the Gleaners because we saw how much food was wasted in the fields while there are starving people in the world." In 1994, the group asked for help and an orchardist offered the use of a portion of his land including an old barn. "At that time, we didn't even know if it was going to work but we needed \$4,000 to put a roof on the barn. People responded with donations."

With the new roof in place, they extensively renovated the barn and built a covered outdoor work area. Once food processing began, they discovered that their original plan to dry food in the open air was impractical. Soon, one of the founders produced a donation of industrial dryers from a fruit processor in Okanagan Falls.

In February of this year, Cookson Motors contributed a 2001 Freightliner truck. Currently, two refrigeration trucks parked on the property keep bins of vegetables from rotting

in the summer heat; the barn lacks space for refrigerators. Working from 8:30 a.m. to approximately 12:30 p.m. with a short break, volunteers typically process enough to fill the dryers to maximum capacity. So far, the Gleaners have never run short of food.

Eugene Unruh, the plant manager, smiles at the irony of the operation. He nods in the direction of the barn, which houses the dryers, barrels, kitchen and washrooms. "This is a 1920s tobacco barn that used to produce something that kills people and now it's put to use to save lives." He also points out that the entire operation exists because of consumers' food preferences.

"About 40 to 50 percent of what is grown gets thrown out. Nutrition has really nothing to do with it—it's all appearance. Cherries are a perfect example. When it rains, water sits in the top of the cherry and, if they're ripe, it splits the top leaving a brown mark. All those cherries get thrown out but they are some of the sweetest cherries, if you ask me." The Gleaners receive apples with blemishes, carrots that are too short, misshapen potatoes and other 'defective' produce.

Eugene picks up one of the onions from the table. "These come from Walla Walla, Washington. The sorting plant throws out about 200,000 pounds daily because they are too big or too small."

The Gleaners also receive more than 1,000 bins of produce per year from Lucerne Foods (a Safeway supplier) including 45,000 kilograms (100,000 pounds) of yellow beans that arrived this August. Smaller, regular contributions arrive from local farmers. Every two years, a church group in Saskatchewan buys and sends the Gleaners 26,000 kg (58,000 lb) of protein-rich yellow peas.

Once all the produce is dried in January or February, the Gleaners begin mixing and packaging the soup. The final recipe depends on the previous year's harvest, but typically,

it contains Brussels sprouts, onions, tomatoes, carrots, peppers, beans, broccoli, cauliflower, beets, turnips, potatoes, peas, lentils and pot barley. There are 15 cups of mix in each bag. The recipients add 100 cups of water (or 50 cups to make stew), let it soak then heat it.

“Most of the food is distributed by Christian organizations like World Vision and New Beginnings Ministries, but of course it doesn’t have to end up feeding Christians. We help everyone regardless of their beliefs,” says Eugene. Individuals can also join the humanitarian effort. “If somebody is going to Mexico to help at an orphanage and they want to take two suitcases of soup mix with them, they can apply.” The Gleaners frequently give excess produce to local soup kitchens, food banks and street ministries.

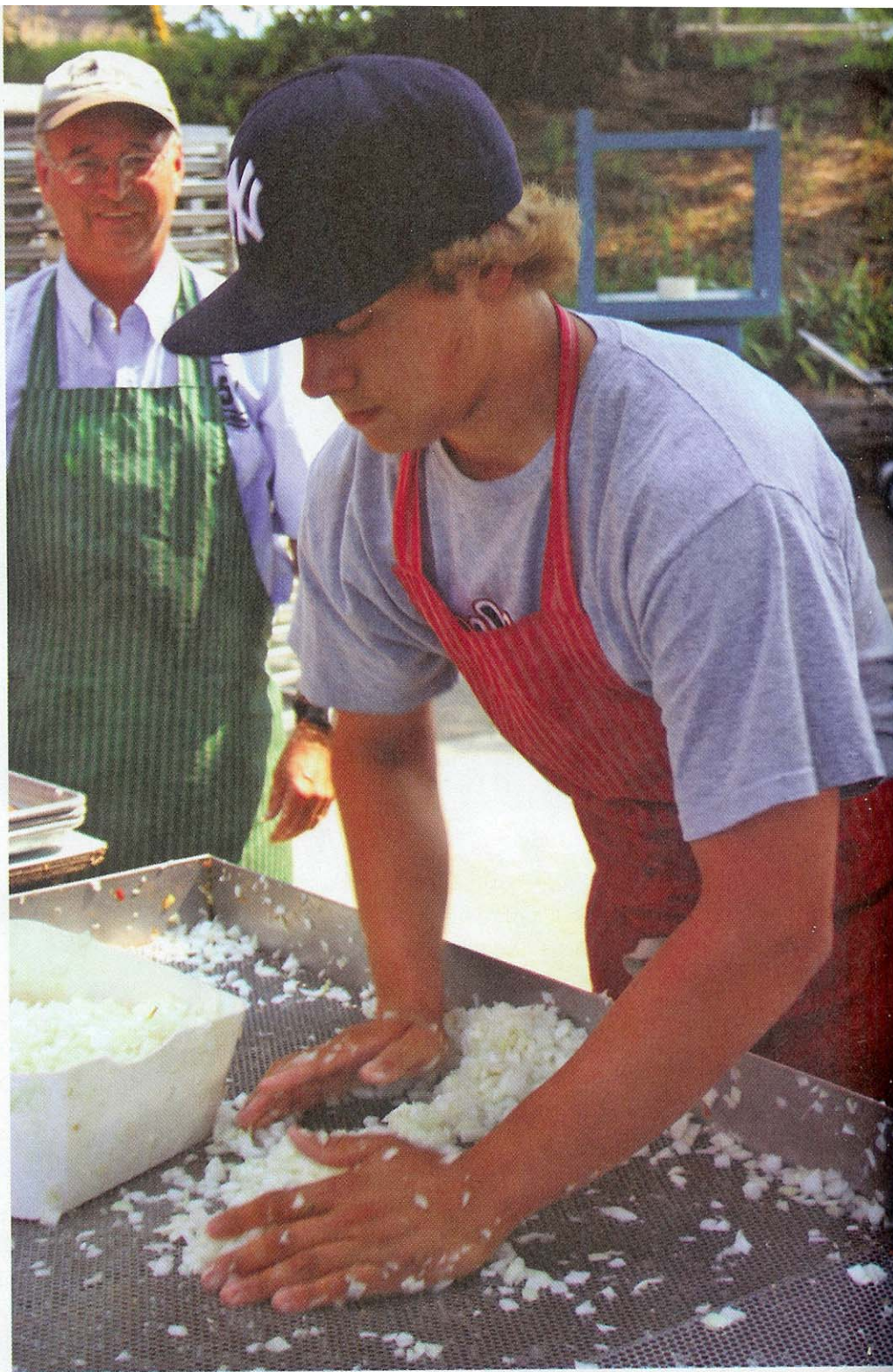
The desire to ease the suffering of more than two billion undernourished people on the planet is compelling. On a return trip to volunteer, I join teens and adults in scrapping dried tomatoes from Teflon sheets then clean fresh peppers. My tablemate owns the bussing company that brought a youth group. The pace is fast but the work and company are very pleasant.

As the first operation of its kind in Canada, the Okanagan Gleaners inspired the establishment of four others in Abbotsford, B.C., Coldstream, B.C., Medicine Hat, Alta., and Cambridge, Ont. Bob and Eugene have gladly shared their knowledge with these groups to help them sort out logistical, zoning and other challenges.

Through the dedication of these gleaners six days a week for 14 years, an untold number of lives have been saved.

Okanagan Gleaners Society, Oliver, B.C., 250-498-8859
www.okanagangleaners.ca

North Okanagan Valley Gleaner’s Society, Coldstream, B.C.,
250-545-1672 - www.novgleaners.org



Rae McClure and Jamison Plett

Fraser Valley Gleaners Society, Abbotsford, B.C., 1-866-772-7070 - www.fvgleaners.org

Prairie Gleaners Society, Medicine Hat, Alta., 403-529-9673
www.prairiegleaners.com

Ontario Christian Gleaners, Cambridge, Ont., 519-624-8245
www.ontariogleaners.org