

The simplicity of what The Food Chain does is also its greatest asset ... it's an easy concept to understand. We feed people who are hungry ...:

- Malnourished people who are hungry and need good food;
- Isolated people who are hungry for love and respect;
- Our wonderful volunteers who are hungry to make a difference and improve the lives of people in their communities.

21 years ago, the outlook for someone who was diagnosed with HIV was bleak. Day to day living was horrific for many, intensified by the fear and stigma that surrounded HIV and AIDS and anyone living with it. Even home care staff, paid to look after the sick and the needy, refused to enter the homes of people living with HIV – because they were afraid.

But out of this pain and fear, a wonderful organisation was born. Courageous people, who realised that human suffering could be made easier in a very simple way, by providing good, honest, home cooked, food, which was delivered by friends with a smile, so that those receiving the meals knew that someone still cared for them. I'm so proud to tell you that this formula hasn't changed and that meals have been delivered every week for 21 years.

By last Sunday The Food Chain had delivered 425,000 meals to those hungry people; has sent thousands of grocery baskets to rebuild bodies decimated by disease... all supported by a dedicated chain of wonderful volunteers, who week after week, get up early - and work late into the night, because they know that their efforts help to change and save lives.

Medication to fight the HIV virus became available 20 years ago and has transformed the prognosis for people living with HIV. So I am often asked *why is there still a need for our services?*

People still think that HIV 'won't happen to them', or don't want to know their status and don't get tested. 1 in 3 people who are diagnosed positive receive a late diagnosis - which often means they are admitted to hospital battling serious infections. We offer these people essential nutrition to rebuild wasted muscles and damaged immune systems.

Over 7,000 people were diagnosed with HIV in the UK last year – a massive rise from 2,800 just 10 years ago... HIV is the fastest growing serious health condition in the UK.

I was at our longest running kitchen in Kentish Town on Sunday to see how we can better support our volunteers and inform them about developments.

One of the volunteers said to me 'I've done this for years but feel like an eldest child ... as it seems all of your attention is going to the younger siblings, the new services ...'. I reiterated the significance of her role, with a letter that we received from a service user, which I will read now:

*I have been trying to write and express myself – and there is no way I can describe what I feel about the food chain.*

*Actually, I wrote so many letters, and threw them away, that I am going to keep with this one, otherwise I will never be able to write the perfect letter and will never post it!*

*I wish I had words to express what it means for me – this Sunday lunch / dinner.*

*The first day was so emotional – and every Sunday morning I look forward, expecting one of you, as if my own family was coming for lunch.*

*I do not have (again) enough kind words to thank all of you for giving me one other reason to live.*

*It is more than food; it is like an invisible family (my invisible family) who is taking care of me in tough times; when I don't even know who I am – nor have many reasons to be.*

*But you are making the difference in my life, helping me to fill that gap.*

Sometime we become immune to the hardships that we see on a daily basis and it may seem that we take our volunteers for granted. We don't say thank you enough, for the remarkable work that our volunteers do ... so please join me now in thanking the countless people that have given their time and support freely, over the past 21 years, to make this organisation what it is today.

It is true that The Food Chain is adapting to meet the evolving needs of our service users. The focus is on self management of chronic illness these days, to compliment effective medication. So we have begun sharing the knowledge built up over 21 years to help people living with HIV understand how good nutrition can keep them well. When people living with HIV have recovered sufficiently and no longer need our meals and groceries, skills learned through *Eating Positively* give them the knowledge to stay well into old age – and lead full lives.

Like many other sectors, we are now faced with an ageing population of service users – our oldest service user is nearly 80. We serve two dozen pensioners and this number is increasing every year. People living with HIV now must contend with the bitter-sweet realisation that they are likely to grow old but will face the ailments which challenge many elderly people – frailty, limited mobility, loss of senses and memory.

We are seeing increasing numbers of new arrivals in the UK, refugees often with horrific personal stories, needing our support - and are having to contend with language barriers and understand cultural differences. Many service users have never seen a supermarket and can't recognise the produce that we have grown up with and find so familiar.

These and other factors will pose new challenges in the coming decades, but we will remain true to our roots and our values.

We have always refrained from 'celebrating milestones ...' preferring instead to 'mark' the occasion discretely, because the fact that our services are still needed is no cause for celebration.

However, this year as we reach our 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday, I think we can all stand proud to *celebrate* the coming of age of this wonderful charity; to *celebrate* the thousands of lives that we have improved; to *celebrate* the endless good will of our volunteers who have given millions of hours of their time to support people in need. Let us please, for a moment, *celebrate* the unique success of human spirit, good will and love that is epitomised by The Food Chain.

The journey we have been on is worthy of a Hollywood movie ... from three guys cooking a meal in a small flat on Christmas day in 1988, to feed housebound friends who were dying ... to the vast operation today which uses six kitchens across London, and is supported by nearly 900 volunteers who delivered over 34,000 individually tailored meals last year.

We will continue to offer these services for as long as there are people living with HIV who need our help to rebuild their damaged immune systems; for as long as there are people in London struggling to feed their families on less than £20 a week; for as long as there are people who are so isolated, that they only see one person every week ... someone with a smile, who brings them lovingly cooked food.

Every penny raised tonight will allow us to reach more people - we have a waiting list of people needing our services, each referred to us by Doctors, nurses and social workers pleading for us to help ...

I want you to know that your support tonight – and hopefully in the future - will change and save the lives of many people.

If you would like to get more involved, you can come and see me to sign up as a volunteer to peel carrots or wash up pans on a Sunday ... or you can take the easy route and bid energetically for our stunning auction lots ... which Mr Richard Brierley will kindly offer to you all now ...

Many thanks to all of you for your support and I hope you continue to enjoy the rest of this wonderful evening.