



BANKING ON FOOD

How one financial expert and business whiz is helping

BY KATE SILVER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS CHURCHILL

GREATER BOSTON FOOD BANK

put food on tables in and around Boston

If Woody Bradford '89 has his way, everyone in eastern Massachusetts will soon have access to at least one meal a day.

As chairman of the board of The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB), he's got an ambitious goal on his plate.

It's also a personal one.

Growing up in the small town of Auburn, Maine, a half-hour north of Portland, Bradford learned early on never to take a meal for granted. Starting in grade school, he joined his dad and stepmom as they drove around town, collecting food salvaged from grocery stores in large banana boxes. They'd comb through the items, discarding anything that couldn't be eaten, and deliver the rest to the home of JoAnn and Ray Pike, a couple who'd set up a makeshift pantry in their garage, sharing food with the neighbors who needed it. That pantry, with the help of Bradford's parents, would go on to become the Good Shepherd Food Bank, the first of its kind in Maine. Today, it's the largest in the state.

Bradford recalls the immediate, visceral difference food makes in a person's life. "You saw the impact you could actually have on somebody's life by helping them satisfy one of the basic foundational needs: food, clothes, shelter," he says. "Food's first for a reason. If you don't eat, you die. We made a big difference to people, and that's always stuck with me."

But it was more than that—there were times Bradford's own family selected items from the pantry's shelves. "We didn't have much growing up," he says. "I'm one of those stories."

They were living in a camp at the time, where heat came from a wood stove and running water was a luxury they had in the summer, but not the winter. The family would frequently shower at his grandparents' house or the local YMCA, and food from the food bank helped stretch out a fair number of meals.

"It's probably the foundational reason I have this great passion for the cause," he says. "I can see what a difference it makes to solve that issue for people."

FOUNDATIONS

When high school graduation approached, Bradford considered only one college option: WPI. He'd always been good at math and science, and was impressed with WPI's reputation as an engineering school. The university was small enough to feel safe, and far enough from home to feel independent. He didn't bother applying anywhere else, figuring if he didn't get in he'd join the military.

He got in.

While at WPI, Bradford played football and joined Sigma Phi Epsilon. He fondly recalls the fraternity's annual Christmas party—the brothers spent weeks soliciting donations of toys from area businesses, and purchased a number of items themselves. Then, one of them would dress as Santa and hand out toys to Worcester kids in need. The experience helped nurture his service mindedness and round out his education.

Academically, he thrived in the sciences, and had trouble selecting a major. Physics? Math?, Chemical engineering? Looking back, he admits he's not sure why he ultimately opted to major in chemistry, but he does recall a couple of influential professors encouraging him to pursue the subject, explaining that there were a number of great career opportunities in the field.

And so there were. His first job after graduation was as a technical service chemist with National Starch and Chemical Co. in New Jersey, where he worked with a group making adhesives. He quickly found a mentor and enjoyed the job. Not long after he began, his company purchased a small adhesives company and needed someone to manage it. "My mentor reached out to me, a little kid straight out of WPI, and said we're going to let you go to work on this. So I got thrown into the pit of figuring stuff out with no real roadmap."

It was the first of many times he would be grateful for his WPI education. "WPI gave me an extraordinary foundation for thinking analytically and thinking logically," he says. "It was the foundational learning that had the biggest impact in terms of my career going forward."

In his new position, he relied on his chemical background, while also publishing in a technical journal, patenting a product he'd developed with his team, rebranding products, seeking FDA approvals, and more. "I realized there was a whole world out there beyond mixing things in a test tube," he says. "So I decided to get a business degree."

On a whim, he applied to Harvard Business School and was accepted, graduating with high distinction as a George F. Baker Scholar. Once again, he credits his WPI foundation for his success. "Harvard Business School is known for the case method of learning, where you don't sit and get lectured to, and you don't get books to study and talk about it afterwards. You're given business cases to solve. And so you're sort of thrown into the pot," he says, likening the experience to the IQPs and MQPs of WPI. "Here's a problem, figure it out."

“I think life does that. Life throws you into the middle of things. So you need a good educational foundation to figure it out.”

FULL PLATE

That business expertise is what led Bradford, in a round-about way, back to his roots: fighting hunger.

In 2004 he was working as managing director with Putnam Investments in Boston, where he sat on a charitable giving committee that oversaw a pool of money that was donated to nonprofits. At that time, The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) had launched a capital campaign to raise the funds needed to build a state-of-the-art, 117,000-sq.-ft. warehouse. The organization pitched Bradford's group at Putnam. “I was the only one on the committee who knew anything about food,” he recalls.

As GBFB president and CEO Catherine D'Amato spoke to the committee about the goals for the warehouse, a familiar name came up: JoAnn Pike, the woman who'd begun the food pantry in Maine with the help of Bradford's family. “She happened to know JoAnn very well, so we had an instant connection,” says Bradford.

After listening to her speak, and taking a tour of the food bank, the committee agreed to donate \$100,000 each year for five years. Putnam was the first corporation to give to the capital campaign.

Looking back on that day, D'Amato recalls Bradford's connection. “When I meet with people who have passion for the food bank, there is usually one little kernel or a connected story—they grew up poor, they had to eat government cheese, they might have missed meals as a kid,” she says. “In Woody's case, his father had this passion, so there was this connection for him and the next generation.”

The experience awakened something in Bradford, and he began volunteering his own time and money with the food bank, even bringing his two sons (now 13 and 16) along. It wasn't long before he joined the board, and he has taken on positions of greater responsibility ever since, building up to his latest role as chairman of the board. While his jobs have changed over the years, with added responsibility and remarkable success (he's currently the president and CEO at Conning, an investment management company for the insurance industry), his commitment to the food bank hasn't wavered.

Because GBFB is a distribution center of food, it works to gather excess food from area grocers and purchase additional food at wholesale prices through donations. The warehouse then distributes food to hundreds of agencies throughout eastern Massachusetts, and those agencies serve it directly to people in need. “We're going to distribute close to 50 million pounds of food this year

The Greater Boston Food Bank

GBFB ranks as one of the largest food banks in the United States. Here's a look at the organization, by the numbers:

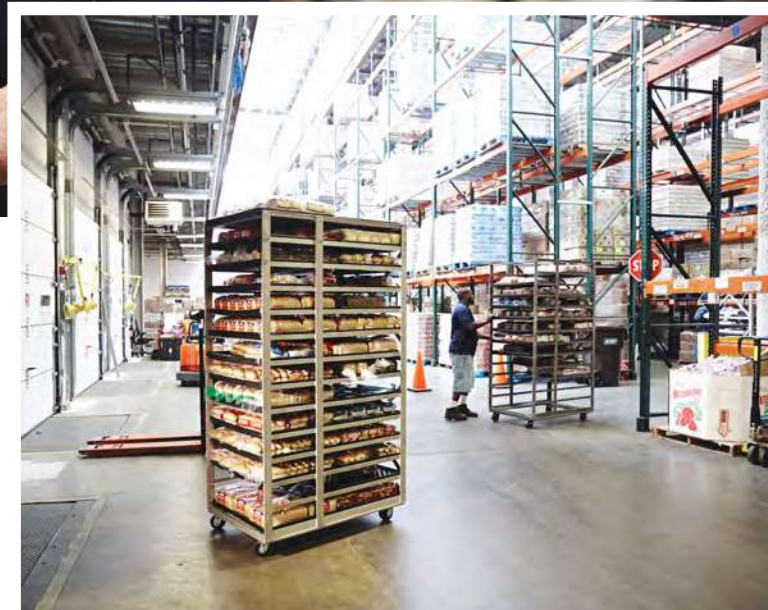
1 of 9	People in eastern Massachusetts at risk of hunger
125,000	Children in eastern Massachusetts at risk of hunger
21%	Increase in requests for assistance from GBFB since 2008
33%	Households served that have a child under 18
15%	Clients served who are 65 and older
72%	Households served that rely regularly on GBFB
61%	Households served that must choose between food and utilities
48	Million pounds of food distributed in 2013
190	Communities served by GBFB
550	Community agencies served by GBFB
545,000	People served in 2013
25,000	Volunteers who sort and distribute food
117,000	Square foot measurement of the food distribution facility (Yawkey Distribution Center)

Learn more about The Greater Boston Food Bank at gbfb.org.

through The Greater Boston Food Bank,” says Bradford, pride seeping through his words.

D'Amato says that from the moment she met Bradford, he began asking tough questions of the organization, and he continues to do that to this day. She describes him as a strategic thinker, and one who really helps her management team excel. “This is a guy who studied at WPI as an undergrad, so he has the technical capability. Then a business degree from Harvard... that's a dangerous combination in terms of skill,” she says. “Because you have the numbers proficiency and the confidence, and then the strategy.”

She adds that his business acumen has helped the organization strive toward a greater impact than she ever could have imagined, and she laughs about how Bradford's leadership and scrutiny has made it more challenging for her on a day-to-day basis. “I can't just go out and ask for another dollar, I assure you,” she says. “I have to prove that that dollar's being spent wisely toward the mis-



sion and will result in a return. That's the nature of his business experience."

But it's not just strategy and financial expertise that Bradford delivers. It's empathy and heart, along with a narrative of hope. "It's a nice connection to see how you cannot lose sight of that kernel," says D'Amato, "whether it's justice or taking care of others or giving back to your community. I think he grew up with limited resources and has done well, and is giving back. It's a great story."

BALANCE

Bradford says his work with the food bank has brought a sense of balance to his life—from the days he was helping his parents deliver food, to his years at WPI, and throughout his career—every piece of knowledge and experience he's picked up has helped fuel the next step. Add to that his work with GBFB and there's a deeper fulfillment and added sense of perspective.

"I have this picture in my head with a set of scales and buckets hanging off in different directions," he says, "and if they're not all balanced, the scales tip over. I think everybody should have some cause or set of causes they can be deeply involved in and make a difference in. Where you can see the difference and feel the difference. I think it makes you a better person."

When Bradford's planning out the financial and business strategy of The Greater Boston Food Bank, he's not just looking at profit and loss statements, or saving money for the shareholders' sakes. In his leadership position with the largest hunger-relief organization in New England, it's all about feeding people. If he finds a way to save the organization money, then more people—people like his own family when he was young—will have food that year.

"I am fortunate to be where I am, given where I came from," says Bradford. "To be able to give back to an effort that I know is actually making a difference, where I can see the tangible difference in lives, is just ridiculously fulfilling." ■