

Brief History of John Van Hengel's Food Banking Concept

(adapted from a speech to the United States Senate by Senator John McCain in honor of John's 80th birthday)

John van Hengel has become known as the "Father of Food Banking." His vision for feeding the hungry and his work making that vision a reality has made a tremendous difference in the lives of millions of people.

John van Hengel's work is a testament to the ability of one person to change the world for the better. In 1965, John was a businessman who volunteered some of his spare time to the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Phoenix, AZ. In the course of his volunteer work, John saw there was a need for additional food for the Society's soup kitchen. In the course of his work, John met a woman who had to collect food from grocery store garbage bins to feed her 10 children. That needy mother told John that there should be a place where surplus food could be stored and available to people who needed it, instead of being thrown out and wasted. As he looked around for ways to better serve the needy people he met, John noticed that fruit was being left unpicked on suburban backyard trees around Phoenix. John recruited volunteers to gather fruit that remained in area fields after harvesting. He then delivered these much needed fruits and vegetables to various local churches. With John's leadership, one of the Nation's first "gleaning" projects became a reality.

John recruited the local grocery stores and asked them to donate surplus food. John also approached his local church, St. Mary's Basilica, and the church responded by loaning John \$3,000 and an abandoned building. In 1967, John van Hengel founded the world's first food bank, named St. Mary's in honor of the church that housed it. Thus was born the first food bank and the concept of food banking--a central source for food donations and distribution to a wide range of local charitable agencies that feed the hungry.

After the creation of the St. Mary's Food Bank, John founded Second Harvest in 1976. With the help of private donations and State and Federal grants, John helped to set up and develop Second Harvest food banks in other nearby communities in Arizona, California, and other States. The success of these new food banks led to Second Harvest becoming formally incorporated in 1979. Today, it is known as America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network, and is the Nation's largest hunger relief charity and a nationwide network of more than 200 regional food banks and food rescue organizations that provide food and other services to more than 50,000 local charitable agencies.

In 1982, John van Hengel stepped down from his full-time role at Second Harvest to pursue his work of spreading food banking internationally. In 1984, John van Hengel founded International Food Banking Services, Inc., a nonprofit food bank consulting organization. John helped spread the notion of food banking and volunteerism in an international capacity, first in Canada through the creation of the Canadian Association of Food Banks, then to France, and to Belgium. Today, the Federation of European Food Banks meets regularly to discuss experiences and ways to expand the work of its members. Recently, the idea of food banking has spread to Brazil, Israel, Mexico, and Japan. John van Hengel's vision, first articulated and acted upon in Phoenix in 1967, is the first link in an international chain of food banks and compassion for the neediest among us.

John van Hengel's food banking idea is simple, but like all truly great ideas, it took the efforts of one man working for a lifetime to reach fruition. Because John van Hengel had the need to help hungry people, he created a concept to address that need. Dozens of countries and millions of people now have a powerful weapon against hunger.