

The hungry among us

And the woman who brings them energy and hope

BY BILL FALLON

As executive director of Food Bank for Westchester, Christina Rohatynsky knows food. And she knows there is not enough of it.

In Westchester County, which has long configured images of gabled slate roofs and internationally known golf courses, she notes between

100,000 and 200,000 people do not have enough to eat — of whom 100,000 are regularly hungry. Statistically, Rohatynsky cites U.S. Census numbers that place the number of hungry at 120,000, and she drives the point home with a cold, hard percentage point.

"That's more than 10 percent of the population, it's surprising to some, but we know the Food Bank provides for people who would otherwise have a hard time meeting their nutritional needs."

The county's affluence — a \$79,000 median income mark — masks the fact that one-quarter of the county's families live on \$45,000 or less. "That's not a lot of money here," she says. "Who does not know that?"

Seniors and children are most vulnerable, even if only part of a picture that includes entire families. "If a child has no food, the child gets sick and cannot study," Rohatynsky says, relating a tragically simple and sadly common arc toward failure. "The child does not study and falls behind in class. The child's nutritional needs are not being met and he falls further behind. The slippery slope has begun. A senior with a chronic condition will see that condition exacerbated without proper nutrition."

"There's no need for these things to happen. And I hope that's how we touch people. We're really giving them energy and relieving the anxiety created by trying to get blood out of a stone. You can imagine it must be very stressful not knowing where your next meal is coming from. When a person's loved ones have food, other needs can be met."

Her first lesson in the scope of American hunger came with the Red Cross in her home state of Michigan. In the 1980s, she was a large-scale artist — sculptures and textiles — who tapped into her organizational and can-do genes for the American Red Cross. What had been a fledgling food effort when she began in 1986 was, when she left as regional director in 1993, serving 200,000 to 300,000 clients across seven Lower Peninsula counties.

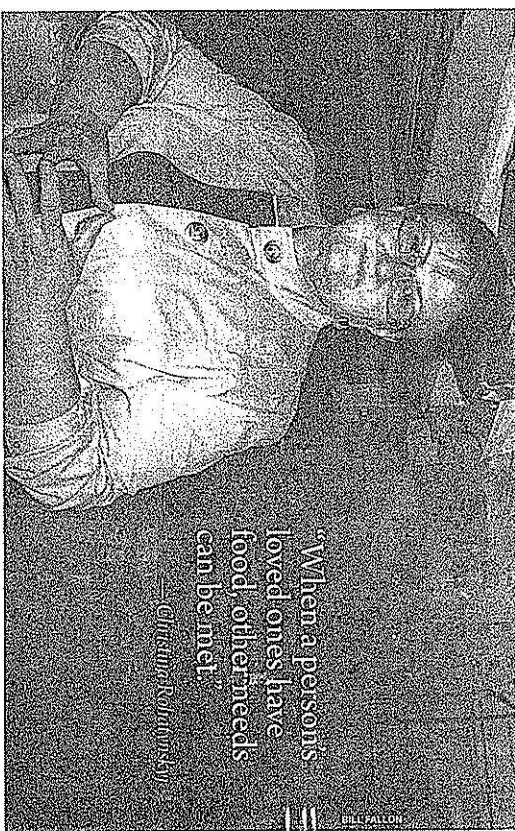
"It's a different language than art," she said, but the "sparkling of multiculturalism" is a common theme of both worlds. She is still an artist though in a smaller scale and creating not as often as she might like.

Such are the demands of overseeing a staff of 26 and a coming move to Elmsted that will see her office space more than double to 5,000 square feet and her warehouse space grow to 32,000 square feet from the current 13,000 square feet. Between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011, the Food Bank of Westchester distributed

"It's the woes, she says, can tumble from something as simple as a budget-busting car repair.

"This is really important work we're doing. The whole staff feels that way."

Ferne Bordash, manager of direct services programs for the Food Bank for Westchester, met Rohatynsky in the office, having just returned from dropping off food bags at a summer school-based distribution center. It is clear from an anecdote shared — a young girl, a close call on the rent, not enough food — that Food Bank



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Christina Rohatynsky in the Food Bank for Westchester's 13,000-square-foot warehouse in Millwood. A new, 37,000-square-foot warehouse opens in Elmsted this fall.

7 million pounds of food, a million pounds more than the previous 12-month bookkeeping cycle.

Rohatynsky is dwarfed by pallets of food stacked to the ceiling at the current facility, but she is clearly not intimidated by them. The scale of what she does — "awe" is an appropriate reaction to walking into the warehouse for the first time — is tempered by the fact there is so much more to do, including she says as she walks, rectifying a few perceptions about the hungry.

"Seventy-nine percent are regular voters. We're not talking about illegals here. We're talking about Americans."

workers routinely witness a very tough slice of life. Says Rohatynsky of Bordash and her coworkers: "They're not making widgets here. They are feeding people. They are giving them hope."

There will be a major fall fundraiser — its 22nd such annual gathering — to benefit the Food Bank from 6 to 9 p.m. Oct. 20 at 1133 Westchester Ave. So far, 25 restaurants have signed up to participate. Rohatynsky expects 600 to 700 people to attend.

"That's what we get normally. Of course, we'd like to break that record."

For more details, visit foodbankforwestchester.org.

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