

## Food for thought

By Teresa Latchford  
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For Joan Stonehocker, life is all about food. Not only is food a universal necessity, it is so much more than the stuff you put on your plate. Food has the ability to bring people together and create a socially inclusive environment whether it be among friends, family or people you haven't met. It's something to which everyone can relate.

"I just love to get in the kitchen and make things from scratch," she said.

"There's nothing better than good food, a glass of wine and friends to make your night."

She had always thought of her love of food as somewhat of a hobby that carried on from her childhood. Growing up in British Columbia, her family was adept at growing their own food.

'She went on to earn a business degree in transportation from the University of British Columbia and landed a job with Esso.

However, she made the decision to leave the corporate world to raise her four children. When they were old enough, she began to revisit career choices while playing with the idea of going back to work.

"When I saw the posting for the food network, it seemed like the perfect fit," she said.

For the past three years, Ms Stonehocker has cherished her position as executive director of the York Region Food Network, a registered charity dedicated to reducing and eliminating hunger in the community through education, awareness and promoting policy changes that increase access to affordable nutritious food for residents.

"There is something about the food sector that just draws me into it," she said, sitting on a bench outside Newmarket's community garden.

"I guess it's about food being nutritious and caring for yourself and others."

She has a plot in the local garden where she grows fresh vegetables every summer and admits it is one of her favourite places to be. Again, it is the food in the garden that bring different people from all walks of life together in an effort to create a sustainable food source.

"My ultimate goal is to raise the awareness that people don't have enough," she said. "That's what keeps me going, even though it is sometimes discouraging."

She watches people bustle through fast food drive-thrus and she can't help but think about the health care costs that become more overwhelming for our society each year.

Quite often, she and her family incorporate the environment and food into projects. One of her favourites is having a car-free day, during which she and her children hop on their bicycles and go shopping for fresh Ontario produce.

Alliance to End Homelessness executive director Jane Wedlock often finds herself in Ms Stonehocker's office across the hall at the Penrose building brainstorming or hammering out the details of joint ventures between the two organizations.

"We share some great ideas and sometimes we plot and scheme together," she laughed.

"But seriously, she has a broad vision of the future which is really inspiring."

She admires Ms Stonehocker's ability to see the connection between policies, food and people rather than just



**Joan Stonehocker.** The Newmarket resident grows her own vegetables in a community garden plot. *Staff Photo/Mike Barrett*

picking one issue with which to work. A broader vision takes into account all facets of the food issues York Region residents face.

During the years, she has come to think of Ms Stonehocker as a very supportive and kind person with a wacky sense of humour. She is passionate about people, even though she seems to most to be a bit introverted. The trick, said Ms Wedlock, is to get her talking about food sustainability and the shyness dissipates. "She is a real champion in the community," she said. "But I have to admit she is an understated, behind-the-scenes kind of person."

Although Ms Stonehocker is always thinking about what needs to happen within the region to increase access to nutritious food for all, including the creation of a York Region food policy, she also enjoys taking time to relax.

"I love being outside," she said. "I've always loved to bike, garden and run."

She can also be found curled up with a good book, which she sees as a great escape and something she will never tire of since there is so much material to read.

She admits to being somewhat of an introvert but, at the same time, cherishes interaction with others since she is so passionate about seeing society healthy and thriving.

"I love people and I love what I do," she said. "It has been very rewarding for me to stand up for my community."

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