

Laurie ‘Duck’ Caldwell is helping ‘glean’ surplus crops so those in need can benefit from fresh fruits and vegetables.



MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/STAFF

SHARING: Under the leadership of Laurie ‘Duck’ Caldwell, Boston Area Gleaners delivered 1.45 million servings of fresh food last year.

By Kathy Shiels Tully / Contributor

MWALTHAM, MASS.
 eeting Laurie “Duck” Caldwell for the first time, I’m surprised.

Somehow, I expected someone bigger, taller, louder. As a volunteer for the past four years with Boston Area Gleaners (BAG), which collects excess fresh produce at local farms for those in need, I’ve watched the nonprofit grow into something of a gleaning giant. What kind of individual, if not giant in size, then towering in persona, could be behind this well-oiled machine?

Maybe it’s my former corporate background that influenced my preconception of Ms. Caldwell. Since joining BAG, I’ve noticed the things that business analysts would look at, too: The roster of volunteers like me has quadrupled, the list of partner farms has grown longer, and the distribution channels to food pantries and agencies have expanded. Even the window for gleaning is now bigger, thanks to indoor gleaning.

But meeting Caldwell for the first time,

I certainly don’t find her in a corner office in some high-rise in downtown Boston. Rather, she’s in a tiny, one-room office housed in an old, defunct school building in the suburbs about 30 minutes outside the city. By no means is it glamorous.

And she’s not a giant.

But still, Caldwell, the executive direc-

‘Are you kidding me? Get out on a farm?’

— Laurie ‘Duck’ Caldwell, talking about her excitement when she signed up to glean as a volunteer

tor of BAG, is pretty much responsible for the group’s, shall we say, mushrooming growth. Though she deflects any praise, her story shows how one person can have a powerful effect on an organization. Caldwell, in fact, was BAG’s first paid employee.

She believes deeply in BAG’s mission of “rescuing” surplus produce (as the

group puts it). Last year, BAG helped deliver 1.45 million four-ounce servings to those who might not otherwise enjoy the benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables.

“She touches every aspect [of the organization], with a gentle touch of preciseness and quality, from volunteers to farmers to agencies,” says Jonathan Goldberg, who serves on BAG’s board of directors.

As Caldwell and I talk, she sits at her desk – an antique, oversize oak one, the kind that schoolteachers used decades ago. Her hands firmly cup a teal-splashed ceramic mug filled with herbal tea.

I learn that she is a carpenter with more than 20 years of experience. Her entry into nonprofits came while living in Vermont, through a program she helped pioneer at Vermont Works for Women. There, she taught incarcerated women skilled trades like carpentry and plumbing, and they built a modular home that was then sold as affordable housing. The pilot program gained national attention.

How Caldwell came to BAG was, like me, as a volunteer.

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How to take action

Universal Giving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects are vetted by Universal Giving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause. Below are links to three groups undertaking efforts related to agriculture and food:

■ **One Mobile Projector per Trainer** (<http://bit.ly/OneMobile>) helps educate the world's poorest billion people with low-cost technology. Take action: Help women farmers in India attain a sustainable livelihood (<http://bit.ly/IndiaWomenFarm>).

■ **KickStart International** (<http://bit.ly/KickStartInt>) provides opportunities for poor, entrepreneurial farmers in sub-Saharan Africa to make money. Take action: Give a day's support to a field agent who is reaching out to farmers (<http://bit.ly/FieldAgentFarm>).

■ **What If? Foundation** (<http://bit.ly/WhatFoundation>) provides food and educational opportunities to impoverished children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Take action: Provide a month's worth of meals to a child (<http://bit.ly/MonthMeals>).

After moving for family reasons to the Boston area in 2007, she continued working as a consultant for the Vermont organization, but lost her job after the 2008 financial crisis. She searched for volunteering opportunities to buoy her spirits while job hunting and discovered BAG.

Founded in 2004 by Oakes Plimpton, a neighbor in her community, it was then known as the Boston Area Farm Gleaning Project.

"Oakes has a huge heart," Caldwell says, speaking fondly of the ageless figure, now a board member emeritus who can still be found gleaning.

She signed up. "Are you kidding me? Get out on a farm?" she says, the excitement still present in her voice.

Gleaning gave Caldwell an emotional boost and challenged her to develop new skills. She and Mr. Plimpton became the organization's first "gleaning coordinators" – arranging farm visits, picking pantries to deliver to, and rounding up volunteers.

Plimpton wanted to hire Caldwell in 2009, but the organization had little money. Seeing BAG's potential and the desperate need, she suggested to Plimpton, "Let's try three months." That stint led to another three months, then another.

It was on Jan. 2, 2010, with salary money secured, that she signed on as BAG's first employee.

Caldwell dug into her new work immediately. She made the gleaning process easier for the farmers, proactively calling them instead of waiting for the farmers to speak up. She grew the solid list of 30 volunteers by recruiting like-minded people at farm, alternative energy, and ecology events. And, knowing she couldn't do it alone, she almost doubled the size of the board of directors.

"You just set up systems to make it easy for farmers [to donate]. The food is already there," she explains simply. "Nothing extra is created."

Mr. Goldberg, one of the board members, says he finds Caldwell "extremely humble."

"It's hard to 'glean' stuff [from her] about the impact she's had on the organization," he says, laughing at his intentional pun. "Though she's not at all 'touchy-feely,' this organization has a feeling to it. I'm sure Duck brought that from her Antioch [University New England experience, where she attained an advanced degree in sustainability]. There, they always ask, How does your

work touch people? She expects her small staff and board to consider that, too."

I know what he means.

Even though Caldwell isn't in the fields these days herself – "I spend my days on the phone doing development work," she tells me – I've felt her imprint time and again. It's everything from the well-thought-out way volunteers are enlisted for gleaning trips (regular e-mail blasts), to the trips to the selected farms (car pools), to how volunteers are trained to pick a crop (bend, kneel, reach, squat), to the breaks (while it's sometimes backbreaking work, we shouldn't break our backs), to my favorite part: being thanked for our efforts that day.

Strawberries, zucchini, corn, beans, carrots, tomatoes, kale, radishes, turnips, beets, squash, apples – everything but bananas fills empty, cardboard banana boxes, which are driven into Boston to a distribution partner such as the Greater Boston Food Bank or Food for Free in Cambridge, Mass.

"BAG is the Cadillac of food distribution to food pantries," says farmer Carl Hills.

Mr. Hills is the owner, along with his wife, Marie, of Kimball Fruit Farm Stand in Pepperell, Mass. Last year, he let BAG glean more than 71,000 pounds of produce on the 200-acre family farm.

The crops gleaned are high-quality, the kind sought out by top chefs at high-end restaurants. "There's nothing 'seconds' about it," Hills says.

Though he's met Caldwell only a few times, Hills says he knows she's the key



to making BAG organized. "She makes it easy," he says.

Brian Cramer is the farm manager at one of the first farms Caldwell volunteered at – Hutchins Farm in Concord, Mass. He says he's seen the nonprofit change and improve since its early days, making it easier for him and his staff to incorporate gleaning into their operation. "It wasn't always on our

radar screen in the past," he admits. But now, two of Mr. Cramer's staff contact BAG directly. "They mobilize crews quickly," he says, referring to BAG.

Once a month, Caldwell meets Sasha Purpura, executive director of Food for Free, for breakfast. As leaders of similar nonprofits, they support each other and compare notes. One result: Ms. Purpura offered BAG the use of Food for Free's cold storage facility.

The benefits have gone in the other direction, too: Caldwell's "willingness to share and collaborate has made a difference," Purpura says.

"Hunger in America can be confusing," notes Purpura, who says that what's shown on television doesn't necessarily get at the heart of the issue – "a lack of nutritious calories."

The fresh produce that BAG collects, she says, is "beautiful food" – something that for many people is out of reach, budgetwise, if it's available only in a supermarket or farmers market.

"So our ability to get people nutritious food," Purpura says, "is what it's all about."

■ For more, visit bostonareagleaners.org.

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