

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

FRIDAY | FEBRUARY 22, 2008

## Food Outreach director works to feed the sick

By **Repps Hudson**

*SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH*



Greg Lukeman  
*(Jerry Naunheim Jr./Special to the Post-Dispatch)*

**Greg Lukeman**  
**Position:** Executive director, Food Outreach Inc.  
**Age:** 48  
**Career:** Agriculture researcher, Monsanto, 1982; sales, Famous-Barr, 1983-1984; food technologist, Chicken of the Sea, Ralston-Purina, 1984-1991; sales, Famous-Barr, 1992; marketing researcher, Maritz, 1992-2001; current position, 2001.  
**Education:** Bachelor of science in biology and chemistry, Drake University, 1981; MBA, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1990.  
**Personal:** Single; lives in Ladue

Since being founded in 1988 as a non-profit agency to deliver food to people under stress with AIDS and HIV, Food Outreach has expanded its scope to include people with cancer. In the seven years since Greg Lukeman became executive director, the agency has nearly doubled its budget to \$1.4 million and serves 1,400 men, women and children from Food Outreach's offices at 3117 Olive Street. About 70 clients get a hot lunch on Mondays. Others get portion-controlled, ready-to-heat meals delivered to their homes, and still others can get canned and dried foods and nutritional supplements from a food pantry at Food Outreach.

A full- and part-time staff of 13 runs the agency.

Volunteers from throughout the area go to Food Outreach to prepare meals, stock shelves and help in other ways. Many local companies, firms and foundations donate money, make in-kind contributions and provide volunteers. This is a point of pride for Lukeman, who stresses the benefits of building and maintaining strong personal relationships.

The agency's annual fundraiser, A Tasteful Affair, raised \$260,000 last year at an auction and dinner prepared by leading area chefs. The next such event will be April 20. Lukeman and I spoke in his modest office in the converted auto body shop Food Outreach owns.

### Why has Food Outreach been successful?

People can relate to food. It's a tangible product, and we have stayed focused. We haven't been all over the place, being everything to everybody. The early adopters for the HIV/AIDS population were gay and lesbian. As the years went by, people realized that AIDS doesn't discriminate and it's everybody's disease, and they can do something about it.

With our capital campaign, some of the largest donations were from very generous heterosexuals.

**HIV/AIDS was never a barrier?**

No.

**You'd think it would be, wouldn't you?**

Yes and no. It has been somewhat of a barrier, with the stigma (of AIDS) still out there. The fact that we have been able to raise as much money as we do each year, having a good product, a good story, equating our services to health care. It costs less to feed one of our clients a year than if they were to spend one day in a hospital.

**That says a lot about the cost of health care.**

It does, but it also says a lot about how efficient we are. There is some apprehension, but I think it's getting better.

**Apprehension from what quarter? We have been living with AIDS for more than 25 years.**

It's probably people who are pretty narrow-minded in their thinking. When I am out and about at some of these events and people ask me what I do and I tell 'em I feed people who are sick. "Oh, wow, that's commendable. Is it something like Meals on Wheels?" "Yeah, but then we treat certain diseases."

**So you aren't telling them too much at first.**

Just testing the water. And when we get to the HIV/AIDS issue, we can see how receptive people are going to be. If they aren't, you cut your losses and move on.

My philosophy is that everybody needs to know about Food Outreach and if they don't, we're not doing our job. Just from a social-economic standpoint, but also from a society standpoint, we have a responsibility to be the nutritional experts.

**Back to my original question: What is it that makes this one of the hot charities in the St. Louis area? Why do people want to be identified with Food Outreach?**

First, I make it a point to make everything personal.

**A lot of this has to do with your approach?**

Some. The board and even the staff are getting more involved in trying to understand what people want to get out of their relationship with Food Outreach.

That is what I see as a challenge. We have a good story to tell. Food Outreach is run like a business. Make no mistake. It's not rocket science. You become more efficient, or you raise money.

**You can't make money, so you have to go get it somewhere.**

On Jan. 1, the clock starts again. And we've been very fortunate that we have made budget almost every year.

**Do you have an annual report?**

No, but we do have "Just the Facts," which gives a two-sided report.

**So you have transparency?**

Definitely. We have a (Form) 990 we file each year with the IRS. There's a 990 clearinghouse, GuideStar.org. You can type in our name and see the 990 we put out there. We are audited every year. That's a public record if someone wants to come in and look at it. And with grants, we have to supply that as well.

**How have you grown?**

Since I came seven years ago in April, we've grown 80 percent. Last year, we had a 20 percent increase in clients.

**How are your overhead costs?**

We are running about 77 percent. That's strictly program. So 77 cents of every dollar will go to programs.

**Is that good?**

Usually when it's 75 (percent), it's OK. When it gets around 70 (percent), some people may think the (administrative) costs are too high.

**For your employees, do you pay more than minimum wage?**

We say we are not only the innovators in supplying nutritional support. We also want to be the innovators when it comes to enhancing the non-profit world and attracting talent.

We pay all their health care premiums. We have retirement accounts for every full-time employee. They have a \$20,000 life insurance policy. And four weeks vacation. And they get to work with me.

**Is that good?**

Whenever I talk with anyone, whether they work here or are a volunteer, I know that I will probably have more passion for this organization than anyone else.

I started volunteering in 1989. Back in 1989, hearing about this mystery disease, people were dying from it. It was so overwhelming, and I was so ignorant. Part of my character is to do something, no matter what, and learn as I go. I showed up to cook one Saturday and got to know some of the great people.

There was an attraction for me in the early years. I know the value of proper nutrition. Whenever I've known people who were critically ill, there is so much to worry about. We want to take at least one worry away. That's why we wanted to expand into cancer. My vision is it shouldn't matter what disease.

**You have to pick your shots, don't you? There's so much out there.**

We do. It made sense to take on cancer because of the nutritional needs of later-stage cancer and full-blown AIDS.

**Anyone in your family have cancer?**

Yes. My mom did. It was my personal motivation. I was always the one to say, "We need to do this."

In a way, it was in memory of my mom. It motivated me to at least tell the story and make the case to the board and everybody else to embrace that.