



## **Meet Natasha Thompson, President & CEO of Food Bank of the Southern Tier...**

### **1. Describe Your Business:**

Food Bank of the Southern Tier distributes food and other grocery items to a network of 165 community organizations across six counties in the Southern Tier: Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler, Tompkins, Tioga, and Broome. Their mission is to build and sustain hunger-free communities across the Southern Tier. Last year, in partnership with

their network of partners, they were able to distribute about 12.5 million pounds of food to people in need.

### **2. Tell us your story:**

Natasha is originally from Rhode Island, and attended college at the University of Rochester. She started in food banking shortly after college. She was an Americorps Vista volunteer, and was placed at the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. After completing her year of service with Americorps, she was able to stay there for another two years. "My boyfriend at the time was from New York and wanted to move back, so we were looking at places in the state that we wanted to relocate to," Natasha said. "I found out about a job at this food bank, and I applied and got the job! I've been here ever since." Natasha has been at the Food Bank of the Southern Tier for seventeen years, and has been president and CEO for ten of those years. "It was kind of a serendipitous thing, but what I like about food banking is that it allows you to be creative with the resources that you have," she explained. "Hunger presents itself differently in different communities, so we're able to tweak the way we do things to meet the needs of a specific community."

### **3. What has helped you succeed and gain experience?**

"Our partnerships in the community are just tremendous," Natasha said. "We couldn't do the work that we do without the generous support of so many organizations and individuals. Not just financial support, but also people who come and volunteer, people who donate food, people who open up their space to house a mobile food pantry. It just runs the gamut. People just rally around this issue." Natasha added that for her personally her success has been due in part to her mentors. "I've been very fortunate to have a strong network of mentors and people who have helped me be successful," she explained. "We have a really great board of directors, and everyone brings different skills to the table. I know that if I have a particular question in a certain area chances are there will be someone sitting around that table who has experience. I'm not ever afraid to ask for help, and that's important. I don't think that asking for help should be perceived as a weakness. I think that people are more than willing to offer help, give advice, and serve in those mentorship roles, and that has really helped me become the person I am."

### **4. What inspires you?**

"It is always inspiring when you meet people out in the community who are touched by the work that you do," Natasha said. "For example, at the gym this morning I met a woman who is an elementary school principal, and we started talking. And when I said I worked at the food at the food bank she said 'Oh my gosh! You guys give us snacks and the Backpack program!' She knew all these different things about the food bank. It was so amazing to meet someone in the community who is directly impacted by the work that we do. She was speaking so passionately about being able to provide her kids with food because of their relationship with the food bank, and how much of a difference it has made in their academic performance, in behavioral issues, in their relationships with kids and families. It was just awesome to have that experience, kind of by accident."

### **5. What keeps you up at night? What are your challenges?**

"I think that there are so many opportunities and so many different needs in the communities that we serve, we have to remember that we can't be all things to all people," Natasha explained. "There's that danger of 'mission creep,' and I'm really sensitive to that. You can't take on everything, and if you lose your focus you might dilute all the good work you're doing. Focusing on what we do well, and partnering with other organizations that have the strengths that we don't is important. I try not to have a scarcity mentality when it comes to funding, like if another organization gets funding that means that we won't get funding. I always like to try to find opportunities to grow the pie instead, because there are so many organizations doing good work. So, we have to try to create an environment where all of us are supported and we can leverage our strengths."

### **6. What is your favorite local activity?**

"I joke that food is my work, but it's also my hobby," Natasha said. "I love cooking food, eating food, talking about food. At this time of year, I love going out to different food-related festivals. I went up to the cheese festival in Odessa a couple of weeks ago, and that was really fun. My favorite restaurant in the area is Stone Cat, so any time I can go there I am super happy. I love picking produce. We went up to Wickham's and picked their delicious cherries, and we're getting ready to go peach picking. So, that's my favorite thing to do. Just go out into the natural beauty, eat good food, harvest good food, and we live in such a great place for that."