



How Syd Mandelbaum and Rock and Wrap It Up! Fight Hunger

by Joan Brun



Welcome to Op Ed News, Syd. Rock and Wrap It Up! is based on a simple idea - that extra food that is prepared but not served should be "recycled" to people who need it rather than dumped in the garbage. Where did the idea come from in?

We were recovering food from Jones Beach Theater in Wantagh, NY in 1993, after starting to do so in June 1991. The Black Crowes were playing. The back stage manager, Herb Robinson, showed me their contract rider. It had a sentence that stipulated that they needed a half ounce of pot in each dressing room. I gave Herb a quizzical look. "How could this be?" Herb smiled and said, "They can't do it but the band wants to show all who see their rider that they support the legalization of marijuana." It hit me like a thunderbolt. "Can we ask in the rider for food not to go into land fill but feed the hungry?" Herb looked at me. "That is a great idea!"

That is the birth of Rock and Wrap It Up! [RWU] Wrap up what you want done in a contract rider and it will happen. We then wrote in band's rider: All edible leftover food, prepared not served cannot go into landfill but must feed the hungry. Rock and Wrap It Up! will arrange for the recovery.

So you took the band's show of support for legalizing pot and tweaked it for your purposes. Masterful. But, you didn't stop with the Jones Beach Theater. How has your mission grown over the years?

Our mission is now based on poverty-reduction, not just treating hunger.

We also added a component which more clearly defines, in modern language the concept of sustainability. Sharon Osbourne called us the first green charity. The reality is that we kept assets out of landfill since our inception, when green was just another color in the Crayola box. In 1995, along with food recovery at Ozzy Osbourne's concert's, Sharon suggested that we recover shampoo and conditioners, as her entourage traveled with these toiletries. They had people collect these items

and place them in a box in their production office. Every few shows they sent them to us, and that was from Europe!

In 2006, John Kluge joined our board. He had just graduated Columbia and told me about a program which was just starting there called Give and Go Green. We joined their efforts and now help recover dorm assets when students graduate and share them with agencies who place families in crisis in new homes. In 2008, through a series of enlightenments by hotels, we launched Hotel Wrap which recovers assets like toilet paper rolls, tissue boxes, shampoo, and conditioner from hotel chains to give them to poverty-fighting agencies. I coined the phrase "You can reduce the poverty footprint by reducing the carbon footprint™." Our reality now is:

Rock and Wrap It Up! is an anti-poverty think tank. Using greening tactics, we recover food and other assets to be given to agencies fighting poverty, increasing their operating budgets. This allows the agencies to hire more services such as tutors, social workers, job placement counselors and mental health counselors to attack the root cause of poverty.

Can you give our readers a concrete sense of what Rock and Wrap it Up! has been able to accomplish since the '90s, in terms of people fed and tons of food that were kept out of the landfill?



Let's talk partners, as that is how we want to be judged. In a nutshell: 150+ bands, 40 sport franchises, over 100 colleges and schools, dozens of hotels, television and movies sets have helped us keep 83,000 tons out of landfills and feed over 500,000,000 people since our first pickup in June 1991.

Impressive numbers! This partners list includes musicians from Aerosmith to Neil Young and 150 more, as well as colleges and venues across the country. Was there a tipping point along the way, when you snagged a certain celebrity or some major media coverage, and it was suddenly so much easier to enlist support for Rock and Wrap It Up!?

Photo: Mandelbaum with Bruce Hornsby

We were blessed to have the credibility as an organization years before we went national. In the summer of 1991, I met Bruce Hornsby and Branford Marsalis backstage at Jones Beach Theater. In December 1990, I had met Ron Delsener through Sandy Chapin. Ron had managed her late husband, the singer Harry Chapin. I was already serving on the Nassau County Human Rights Commission as a commissioner.

In 1987, the commission organized a conference which I co-chaired titled "Your Human Rights are My Responsibility." It was held at Hofstra University and was aimed at high school juniors, to teach them how to be more tolerant of others. Our keynote speaker was to be Billy Joel. Billy canceled the week before the conference and one of the HRC staff members knew Sandy, who did speak. In 1988, I was already active in the establishment of the Claddagh INN soup kitchen in Rockaway Beach. Sandy approached me to serve on the Board of Directors of Long Island Cares, a regional food bank. I accepted.

Ron offered me an opportunity to go backstage at Jones Beach Theater and recover food that was being wasted. By 1991, the Claddagh was serving hundreds of meals daily and any offer to get prepared food was a blessing. So, backstage that late August afternoon, I played basketball in a pickup game, Bruce Hornsby and Branford, against John Mollo, the drummer of Hornsby's band, the Range. The years still have not darkened the results of John and me beating them! Branford became a speaker in 1992 at our Human Rights Conference. He spoke eloquently about growing up in New Orleans and the racism he faced. Branford and Bruce were also Deadheads who on occasion would play with the Grateful Dead. Bruce had joined the band after the death of organist Brent Mydland in 1990.

Bruce Hornsby became our first national spokesman in 1994. We were launched by MTV on Labor Day weekend 1994 by their news chief, Kurt Loder. Kurt and I met years earlier, being the few men at a Joan Jett concert in 1988. We stayed friends and he and MTV News covered Branford's talk at Hofstra when he spoke. Kirk's two-minute piece got us hundreds of volunteers and helped launch us. Bruce's credibility as a musician helped us to get more bands.

What does the "Rock" portion of Rock and Wrap It Up! refer to?

As we started as a music based charity, the name was a play on the types of music we were working with Rock and Roll and Rap.



Photo: Jerry Garcia and Mandelbaum Deadheads

*Was including popular musicians, athletes and teams important partly **because of** their celebrity, making it "cool" to recover food?*

Yes. We did not include them as much as work with them. Their celebrity was used more to help get students to participate in our School Program. We have 25 celebrities sign blank certificates of appreciation and gave them to students who started food recovery programs in our schools, to emulate the bands and teams. The most popular ones were Dave Matthews, Anthony Kedis, David Wright and Eli Manning.

Your parents were Holocaust survivors. Is there a connection between that fact and what you have chosen to do with your life?

I have dedicated my work to their survival as teenagers over all odds. Their parents were murdered on June 8, 1942, when the entire Jewish population of the town of Szczkowa, Poland, was gassed and cremated. My parents were slaves and were starved in German concentration camps. I heard these stories growing up and vowed to end hunger in their honor. I wear tattoos on my arms, which reminds me each day about their lives.



Photo: Syd, Dylan and Ryan

You mentioned before that while you have kept up your food redistribution, your think tank is working on reducing poverty. Can you explain what the difference is between the two?

Hunger is a symptom of poverty. We work to attack the root causes of poverty. The great Gandhi once said "Poverty is equal to violence and hunger inflicts its deepest wound."

A new book came out recently to rave reviews called Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal. In it, British author Tristram Stuart claims that as much as 50% of all food is wasted in the US. Are you familiar with the book? Its coming out now can't help but buttress your efforts.

The numbers you quote sound plausible. At a Kansas City conference where I spoke in 2008, the USDA stated that 98 *billion* pounds of food are thrown away each year. Up from 95 billion in 2001, when former USDA head Dan Glickman quoted that number upon receiving the Rock and Wrap it Up! Good Samaritan Award.

What a huge waste, literally. Let's take a break. When we come back, Syd will tell us more about how RWU has become such a success. I hope you'll join us.