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HEALTH

13 READERS
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RESOLUTIONS

THE DUO
BEHIND THE
FOOD BRIGADE

FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS

Founders Of The Food Brigade

Of course she fell for him. How could you not fall for the guy who sued you and drove you into bankruptcy? And, by the way, together they're fighting food insecurity in a big way.

Karen and Carmine DeMarco, together 32 years, want to be the “cutting edge” of charitable food assistance in New Jersey. They created The Food Brigade, which fed nearly 50,000 people in 2024. Karen, 59, is an entrepreneur turned real estate broker; Carmine, 65, a retired commercial litigator with a background in internet marketing. They lived for years in Dumont, where they raised three children, and now live in Maywood with a cat and dog.

And oh—they had a “meet” that was a little south of “cute.” Rom-com writers, grab your pens.

Have you always volunteered?

KAREN: Yes. My parents used to call me Flo for Florence Nightingale. And it's always been part of my relationship with Carmine. When we got together, he was working at a homeless shelter. He said, “You like to cook. Why don't you come along?” I did, and I was hooked. I ran the kitchen and dinners, Carmine the overnight program, and we ended up becoming coordinators. After we had our children we had less time, but we'd still donate food.

How did that grow into The Food Brigade?

KAREN: In 2017 I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

CARMINE: She needed a double mastectomy. **KAREN:** Obviously I couldn't cook. I worried my kids were going to eat nothing but the “Dad special,” buttered noodles and mac & cheese. But a friend organized a meal train, delivering meals to our house for weeks. To “give back” I started the Dumont Meal Brigade, a Facebook group that did meal trains for people after an illness, loss of a job or death in the family.

How did it grow?

KAREN: COVID. When Meals on Wheels stopped delivering, I got a call from someone in Social Services. She asked if the Dumont Meal Brigade could help. That's how I ended up cooking 1,800 meals between March and July 2020.



CARMINE: Things kept going from there. We got Farmers to Families food boxes from the USDA and put together meal-box pickups at Calvary United Methodist Church in Dumont for over 75 families. We now have three community markets—in Bergen, Hudson and Passaic counties.

What makes The Food Brigade different from other organizations?

CARMINE: We want to bring the highest level of dignity and respect to food assistance. Other pantries throw food at people. They won't even make eye contact, and it's demeaning.

KAREN: The hardest phone call anyone makes is to ask for food. People always feel the need to validate it, to explain the whys. I tell them to stop. There's no need. You just did the hardest part. Now come get help.

You still work on site?

KAREN: Almost every day! Training new volunteers I'll introduce myself and they'll say, “Oh my God, you're Karen from the website!”

How did you two meet?

KAREN: [Laughs.] You tell it!

CARMINE: I was handling business lawsuits. Karen bought her first business at age 19—a gymnastics studio. Her landlord was my client, and she'd been having problems with leaks, mice and electrical outages. I didn't know any of that. I just knew my client told me he had a tenant who wasn't paying rent, and I had a job to do. So I sued Karen. I got a judgment against her, forced her out of business and drove her into personal bankruptcy.

Huh?

CARMINE: Years later we met again—another lawyer I shared office space with was helping her with documents. She heard my name and said, “You need to introduce me to the guy who ruined my life.” He did. We got to talking, and talked for three hours. We discovered we'd been supposed to meet to discuss the case four years earlier *to the day*, but Karen never showed up. I asked if she wanted to get drinks.

KAREN: Now, you tell me. If you ruined someone's life, don't you think you'd at least offer them *dinner*?

CARMINE: I still ask sometimes, “Have I made it up to you yet? Are we square?” [Laughs.]

Is it hard working together?

CARMINE: We both try to stay in our lanes. Karen handles the actual food distribution, I handle the book-keeping, fundraising and tax implications.

KAREN: And if we really disagree, I can always remind him that I'm president, and I get to make the final call.

CARMINE: [Laughs.] Sometimes she does pull rank on me, yeah.

Thoughts on your mission?

CARMINE: Wherever you live in Bergen County, no matter how affluent your community, there's somebody within five minutes of you dealing with food insecurity. The first step to fixing it is knowing it's there.

KAREN: I tell new volunteers to be prepared to see someone they know walk in. “Just say hello and act like you met in the supermarket,” I say. “There's nothing shameful going on here.”

—Kirsten Meehan