

Saying Goodbye to Distribution Street AND HELLO TO NEW BEGINNINGS

by Elizabeth Leland



Mark Fortenberry photo

Twenty-five years ago, Friendship Trays moved into a gleaming-new commercial kitchen created out of an old warehouse where workers once knitted women's hosiery.

From the very first day, 2401 Distribution Street was so much more than a building.

It was a bustling, happy gathering spot for thousands of volunteers and staff who shared a common passion: Providing nutritious meals to people who could not get or prepare their own.

"It always felt good in that building when you walked in," said Lani Lawrence, volunteer coordinator. "There was just real good karma in there."

Now Friendship Trays is merging with Loaves & Fishes and will move to new headquarters on Griffith Road. Bruce and Laura Parker, who donated the Distribution Street site for 25 years *without ever collecting any rent from Friendship Trays*, have sold the old warehouse building.

An era has ended. But not the memories.

Continued 

It was in 1994, during a board meeting, when Bruce Parker floated the idea of setting up shop on Distribution Street. Friendship Trays had outgrown its space at St. Martin's Episcopal Church and board members were scouting for a new site but weren't having much luck.

"I mentioned in passing that I had some warehouse space that might be usable," Parker said.

The next day, board members visited 2401 Distribution Street — and immediately took Bruce and Laura Parker up on their generous offer.

"I remember walking through with Bruce the first time, looking at it, the cement floor and huge walls," said Tia McCutcheon, who was executive director of Friendship Trays at the time. McCutcheon said she could envision the rebirth of that old warehouse into exactly what Friendship Trays needed.

"It was so exciting and it took on a life of its own," she said.

Board member Chris Clackum, who worked for WCNC-TV then, said he reported a story for the television station about the relocation and asked Parker why he would donate the space for free. "His answer stuck with me," Clackum said, recalling that Parker responded to his question with a Bible verse: "To whom much is given, much will be required."

"It just went like magic...we had an empty warehouse turned into a commercial kitchen turned into a distribution center"

said Marg Kuhn, a former board member and volunteer. "We had an empty warehouse turned into a commercial kitchen turned into a distribution center. But it was hard work that made it happen."

And also a bit of creative finagling.

They needed space for parking behind the building but Norfolk Southern controlled the land as the right of way along an old rail spur that once connected the warehouse to the main line of the railroad. "As long as the tracks were there, Norfolk Southern wasn't willing to give up the right of way," Parker said.

So Parker had the tracks removed. Then he called the railroad company and announced that there were no longer any tracks behind the warehouse.

"There was a silence on the other end of the line," Parker recalled.

"Where are they?" the railroad official asked.

"Where do you want them?" Parker replied.

Parker had the tracks delivered to the appointed place and the railroad forfeited the right of way.

The entire transformation of 2401 Distribution St., inside and out, took about six months and cost around \$512,000.

Despite the beautifully-redone space, when the moment finally came to relocate, there was some trepidation. Although that area of Charlotte now thrives with apartments, restaurants and breweries, back then Distribution Street was located in an off-the-beaten-path industrial warehouse district.

"The board of directors was nervous about us coming over here because they were afraid all the volunteers were going to get mugged," said executive director Lucy Bush Carter. "It was such an isolated area.... And look where we are now — can you imagine that was the case back then?"

Friendship Trays dedicated the new building on March 27, 1996. Distribution Street quickly lived up to its name. Within a few years, the number of people that Friendship Tray served grew from around 275 to about 800.

Some days, when his own job next door seemed especially demanding, Parker said he would go outside and watch the Friendship Trays volunteers arrive for their meal deliveries. "They were all happy and cheerful," he said. "It changed my attitude for the day to good."

Among the many volunteers were staff from Parker Medical. Also people with special needs. College students on spring break. And during snow storms, when the streets turned treacherous, Crowder Construction took charge of deliveries.

Kelly Vass, who is now Friendship Trays' Program Director, said that delivering meals was often an adventure. She got



Chef Lamont working his magic.

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to visit parts of the city that were new to her and meet people she might not normally encounter. "The encounters and relationships were just magnificent and warmed my heart," she said.

At the time she volunteered delivering meals, Kelly's two boys were around 4 and 2. She didn't want to have to get them in and out of her car multiple times a day on a given route. So Carter sent her to an apartment complex at the intersection of Sharon Amity and Hickory Grove roads.

"We would park and get out and no one would be there," Kelly said. "And then, all of a sudden, there would be fifteen people, because people wanted to have interactions with my kids. It was just the sweetest encounter for my boys to be doted upon. It was a community of individuals that were physically impaired. So my boys at an early age were exposed to different people and it was beautiful because they never questioned why someone didn't have legs, or why someone didn't have arms or why someone shook."

David Blough, outreach coordinator, fondly recalls one volunteer who, after completing their route, would return to a meal recipient's home and spend time coloring with the recipient. Blough said the volunteer took time out of their job when they probably didn't have the time to spare – and they did it on a regular basis.

So much of what happened seemed divinely inspired, McCutcheon said. She remembers sitting in her office one afternoon around 1:30, looking into an empty kitchen. The work of cooking and delivering meals was finished for the day. Everybody had gone home. The sight of that empty kitchen troubled McCutcheon.

"I thought it's crazy to have this beautiful facility and to not be utilizing it more," she said.

And so, at the next board meeting, she suggested they start a culinary school there. Even all these years later, McCutcheon still tears up when she shares the memory.

"Linda (Vogler, founding director of Community Culinary School of Charlotte) walked up to me and said 'I want to be your chef.' She said 'We can do a culinary school.' And it was just like God had said, 'I've given you the building. I've given you the kitchen. I've given you this beautiful person to come and offer you this program.'



Mark Fortenberry photo

"The whole thing, there is no other word but miraculous."

Vogler – Chef Linda to many people – was on the board of Community Food Rescue then. She remembers telling McCutcheon that "'God told me that I'm the person to do this.' And McCutcheon responded, "I just asked God to find someone to do this."

"It really made so much sense," Vogler said. "We began teaching culinary skills by turning rescued food into meals! It all just came along and fell into place. It was just magical."

The culinary school opened in 1998, offering people a second chance out of poverty and homelessness by teaching them skills necessary for careers in the food service industry. Students learned by working with Friendship Trays staff and volunteers during the morning meal production hours. In the afternoon, they learned additional skills from chefs and other culinary professionals – as well as from human resources consultants who tutored them on a range of topics including how to dress for an interview to the importance of punctuality. The culinary school worked out of the Distribution Street site until 2014, when it relocated to Monroe Road.

As the years passed, the building served other purposes, too – as a party space and as a cafe. Outdoors, a big, beautiful

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vegetable garden sprouted, growing fresh produce for the meals and serving as a demonstration garden for other plots across the city.

“When we made the decision to move and build that kitchen, it was such a big deal,” Carter remembered. “We got to pick everything out. It was so bright and shiny and new. As I told one of the other employees, we spent more time in that building than we did in our homes. Leaving is bittersweet.”

At some point later this year, the space that came alive each weekday with so much passion and dedication, goodwill and hard work, camaraderie and occasional stopped-up toilets, will stand empty. Lights off. Voices silenced.

But on the brick wall at the front right corner of the warehouse, a colorful testament will remain to all that was and all that will continue to be:

The “Mother Nature” mural by Rosalia Torres-Weiner, telling the story through art of the many women over the years who made up most of the workforce and most of the volunteers – hard-working, compassionate women with incredible vision who transformed Friendship Trays into what it is today. The building may be shuttered, but their vision continues.

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Please visit friendshiptrays.org to learn more about our exciting merger with Loaves & Fishes, as well as how to continue to help through donations and/or volunteer opportunities.

We still need you, and we appreciate your continued support!