

THE ZEIT GIST

The faces behind the numbers: A day feeding Tokyo's hungry

By YURI TOMIKAWA

Last in a two-part series On a typical Saturday evening, I stroll around the bustling streets of Shibuya with my friends, dressed up, heels clicking, ready to hit a couple of trendy shops. The chilly breeze puffs up the hairs on my arms and I shudder — winter is approaching. We chat about school, boys, life, this girl's shoes, that lady's bag, when suddenly — like the zoom lens of a camera — my focus shifts. Under the roof of a closed shop lays a dark mound: a homeless man. I have an immediate desire to rush over, offer money — *do something*. My eyes stare, my brain buzzes with ideas. My legs, however, keep moving. It's no use, I think. Money runs out, and what would he use it for — drugs, alcohol, cigarettes? So I walk on.

In an ultramodern city of 12.6 million citizens, 95 million mobile phones and 80,000 restaurants, this is the stark reality: 4.4 percent unemployed, 460,000 lacking food security and over 3,000 homeless, sleeping in tents, seeking shelter under roofs, wandering from street to street. From a young age, I had been concerned about homelessness, but until recently the most I'd done about it was buy goods at charity bake sales or dump out change into collection boxes next to cash registers.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SECOND HARVEST JAPAN



Earlier this year, however, I finally took action. I signed up for a Saturday food distribution shift for homeless people at Ueno organized by Second Harvest Japan, a food bank group.

The warehouse Second Harvest uses in Asakusabashi is a garage-like area on the first floor of a gray office building. By the time I arrive, the volunteers are already working at full tilt in the storeroom, dumping canned foods into large pots, piling up cardboard boxes and hauling containers onto vans.

As I knuckle down to my first task — cleaning bananas — I observe the other volunteers. The people range in age from teenagers to late 40s. They come from all over the world, and most speak English fluently. All but three of those working are volunteers.

For three hours I suppress my usual excessive desire for cleanliness and perfection as I get covered in red liquid from decayed fruit and breathe in the musty smell of bananas.

On the train to Ueno, I finally get a chance to question my contact, Patricia, and the other volunteers about Second Harvest Japan. The organization's food and financial support comes from various enterprises, the primary food donor being Costco Wholesales. The group not only serves homeless people but also soup kitchens, orphanages, the elderly, emergency shelters, alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers, refugees, single mothers and migrant workers. The bananas, for example, will be delivered to a Japanese orphanage in the afternoon.

"One third of perfectly good food in Japan is wasted," they tell me. "There just has to be a system of collecting and redistributing the food; we're that system."

As we approach the food distribution area in Ueno Park, the scene stuns me: A long line of homeless people stretching as far as the eye can see. I estimate there are at least 200 people; I later learn there are 430.

After everything is laid out, Patricia gathers the volunteers around, designating specific jobs to each person — serving soup, rice, bread, meat, vegetables, passing bowls, placing spoons and chopsticks. Donning plastic gloves and an apron, ladle poised, I squat down next to a large, steaming pot of soup. Once all the servers are ready, we have a run-through. The polyester foam bowl starts at the other end of the line,

passed down person to person. Some rice is served, sauteed vegetables ladled out on top, pickled vegetables laid on the side, meatballs plopped in the middle, and a dash of sauce poured over them. At my end of the line, someone separates paper cups and passes them to me one by one. Once the soup has been poured, chopsticks are placed in the cup and the meal is ready to be served.

The food distribution system works like an assembly line: Pour, pass, pour, pass, pour, pass. Soon, the constant time pressure and lack of interaction starts to frustrate me: I am spending my whole Saturday helping others and can't even see whether they are enjoying the food or not. My face is full of steam, my hand burns from spilled soup, and my legs ache from squatting — this is not what I'd anticipated.

A series of bellows drift over from the other end of the line. Ladle and cup in hand, I sneak a peek over the table and see a man having a row with one of the workers in charge. Middle-aged, with an unrestrained beard and temper, the man barks insults, pointing his finger up and down, glaring at the helper, his neck jutting out over his stooped shoulders.

Anxious, I ask Patricia if these are common incidents and whether she's in constant fear. It doesn't happen often, she explains, especially compared to during food distributions in the U.S., but when it does we have to understand that these are not the TV-watching, chess-playing portion of the population. Homeless people are just that: homeless. Most of them live on their own, have little communication with others, and are often just seeking a bit of attention.

I resume filling the cups, pouring my distress into the work. After many more cups, the volunteer who has been taking my soup and handing it out turns to me and asks if I would like to switch roles. I gladly accept, quickly handing her the ladle.

I stand up — I can stretch my legs and arms! — and look up. I am finally facing my "customers," and not one of them is grumbling or glaring, snatching or swearing. Only a few smell bad, and none of them are terribly unkempt. There are men with overgrown but combed hair; old women with bags full of storable food; middle-aged men with arthritis; dapper salarymen. They are all unpredictable.

I carefully pick up the filled cups from the table and hand

them out to my customers, warning them the soup is hot and wishing them a good day. The process is rhythmic and repetitive, but — listening to the conversations, acknowledging the frequent thank-yous, and returning the smiles — never boring.

Over time I grow fond of a couple of customers. One is a bent, middle-aged woman covered in layers of clothes and wearing a bonnet-like cloth on her head that covers most of her face. She is picky, pickier than most of the girls I know. She asks for the vegetables to be placed separate from the rice. She points out that she doesn't want the pickled vegetables and wants an extra serving of meatballs instead. There's also a short, tanned, middle-aged man who — as he wobbles forward in line — gives me a boyish grin that stretches across his face, deepening his wrinkles and creating a black, hollow space where his teeth should be.

Soon, we reach the "safety point" — everyone has been served once — but the distribution continues. Then the soup runs out, followed by the rice, vegetables, and the rest of the food supply. I help the other volunteers pack up the equipment: empty pots and containers, boxes of used chopsticks, bursting trash bags.

Patricia removes a full trash bag from its garbage can. Before closing it, however, she scrutinizes the contents. Noticing my puzzled look, she smiles. It's a way to see what the people liked and disliked, she explains.

The idea that homeless people would throw away food because they had preferences never even occurred to me. Curious, I too peer into the bag — it seems they didn't think much of the vegetables.

We haul the rest of the equipment onto the van and gather into a circle with the other volunteers. One of the volunteer leaders explains that we've handed out 600 servings — an all-time record.

As I stagger home, I reflect on the day. I had been expecting something more effortless, light, relaxed. I also thought we would get some kind of proper recognition at the beginning and the end. But the distribution was for the homeless, not the pride of the volunteers.

I had also imagined that the homeless people would be

unkempt and shy, almost ashamed of receiving food from us — especially from me, someone much younger than them. But they had needs to fulfill; embarrassment would only get in the way of meeting those needs.

Yet, at the same time, they had dignity. These people did not have the financial or material security that I have, but they were not completely different either: We both had outbursts of anger, the desire to appear neat and stay clean, likes and dislikes for food.

I realize why I liked those two customers so much — the bent lady and the smiley man: I recognized similarities between their personalities and mine. Their actions gave them an individuality, a trait that separated them from all the rest.

As author Dale Carnegie said, "When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bustling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity."

On World Food Day, media reports talk about hunger as a single, global issue and "the hungry" and "the homeless" in terms of statistics in the thousands and millions. A day spent in Ueno Park, on the other hand, is a reminder that behind these huge numbers are people with unique pasts, personalities and stories.

World Food Day 2007 (Oct. 16):

www.fao.org/wfd2007/index_wfd2007.html *Second Harvest Japan:*
www.2hj.org/index.php/news/C4 *Send comments/story ideas to:*
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