

## 'WILL WORK FOR FOOD': Group gleans leftover crops to fight hunger

### Finger Lake Times

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SENECA CASTLE — Earlier this month a group of volunteers dispersed among three Finger Lakes fields. Their mission: Collect as much leftover crops as they could.

They pulled carrots from the ground at Larry Christensen's farm outside Penn Yan, gathered butternut squash from the fields at Hemdale Farms in Seneca Castle and plucked apples from the trees at Seneca Orchards, also in Seneca Castle.

That morning of labor was not in vain. The group — which calls itself God's Gracious Gleaners — collected 5 tons of squash, dug up 1 ton of carrots and gathered 1,000 pounds of apples.

This is the 10th year that the group has gleaned at Finger Lakes farms. Their efforts have been coordinated by Cliff Kunes Jr., who, at 84, still works in the fields despite arthritis.

Kunes attends the United Methodist Church in Seneca Castle and recalls a conversation years ago with fellow church member Milton Soper (now deceased).

"We were at a meeting and he suggested that a lot of stuff doesn't get harvested," Kunes recalled. "That's what kind of got it started."

God's Gracious Gleaners was started by the Upper New York Conference of the United Methodist Men, but today is an ecumenical group, according to Dean Burdick of Central Square, who holds the title of the group's food advocate. Its members are scattered throughout Central New York, hailing from such places as Auburn, Geneva and Wolcott to Utica, Boonville and Binghamton.

"It's now made up of different faiths and walks of life, whoever comes along and wants to get involved is on my email list," explained Burdick, who attends Central Square Community Church.

The group does more than gleaning.

Many members are affiliated with food pantries in their hometowns and are active in other events to feed the hungry, like potato drops through the Society of St. Andrew (<http://endhunger.org/ppp>) and canned goods drives at large sporting events, Burdick said.

Their Finger Lakes outing occurred Oct. 15, a warm and sunny day that especially pleased Kunes.

"We've never had as beautiful weather as we've had a week ago," he said. "We've done it before in the rain."

About 35 gleaners gathered at 8:30 a.m. and fortified themselves with coffee, hot chocolate and baked goods before splitting up into three groups and heading to the different farms. Kunes arranges the

donation of cardboard boxes from nearby Pedersen Farms and the delivery of pallets from Foodlink in Rochester, which picks up the produce after it's gleaned.

"I've lived here for 60 years, so I know these farms pretty well," he said.

Each year Kunes tries to get three different crops for the gleaners to gather. The squash and carrots have been mainstays, but the apples were new this year. He had stopped by Seneca Orchards to buy some apples, and after a conversation with owner Charles Smith left with an invitation to glean the trees. Kunes was thrilled the group actually got to pick from the trees — and not gather apples that had fallen to the ground — because those could have been bruised.

Smith said apples on the ground can not only bruise, but also get muddy — and are not good enough for anybody to eat. He was more than happy to let God's Gracious Gleaners pick from his trees, and hopes they will return next year.

"I believe in doing things for the community as much as I can," Smith said.

On Oct. 15, Kunes' shift involved driving a pickup truck for the carrot gleaners, who had no easy task.

"They have to pull and dig the carrots right out of the ground and cut the tops," Kunes said.

Burdick agreed, noting he thought more people would at first volunteer to pick apples.

"It's quite a lot of energy to do carrots or squash," he said. "I was amazed at how many people stayed to do that."

Burdick noted that some of the produce collected locally goes back with the volunteers to their individual food pantries. He said the United Methodist Men's group is trying to mentor and develop more localized gleaning efforts.

Although the produce they collect may not be perfect or up to supermarket standards, it can feed lots of people.

"We're trying to feed the hungry. There's a big demand for food and all that food is going to waste otherwise," Burdick said, noting the squash fields were plowed under days after the group was there. "I just get a great satisfaction knowing that I'm helping to erase hunger in our lifetime."

And there is also joy in doing good deeds together, Kunes said.

"A lot of the guys and ladies kind of look forward to this. We get such a good turnout."