

# Come and Get It

How a grieving mother decided to feed her community



**S**Ocial media is not my thing. But my wife, Sara, happened to be looking at Instagram last year, on the seventh anniversary of my son Michael's death, and that's where we first saw the Harlem Community Fridge. Michael, an advocate for food justice, would have loved the project, where anyone in need could come and get fresh food for free. I decided to start a fridge like that in my Bronx neighborhood in memory of Michael, who struggled with bipolar disorder and took his own life at age 21.

I'm a special ed teacher, and Sara is a programmer. Neither of us knew a thing about this sort of mutual aid initiative. By the end of that day, though, we owned a refrigerator, bought for \$300 on Craigslist.

Next, Sara and I walked along Broadway in our neighborhood and asked store owners if we could leave our fridge on their sidewalk and plug it into their outlet. Quite a few shopkeepers asked, "Are you kidding?" before one of the owners of the Last Stop bar said, "Yes, we've got to help everyone." He's an angel. Later, we moved a few yards away and plugged into the Jerusalem Cafe. We named it the Friendly Fridge BX—it's the first community fridge in the Bronx.

At first we bought food with our own money. But as word got out, we started getting donations from individuals, community groups and local merchants. We receive greens, breads, soups, salads and treats from a Hebrew school, the local community center, a farmers market and a

private college, among many others. New York City's food-pantry network participates, too. Nowadays we refill the fridge seven or eight times a day.

This past May 18 was the eighth anniversary of Michael's death, which is always a difficult day for me. I didn't mention it to anyone. A local food-pantry manager remembered, though, and brought an extra-abundant truckload of fresh produce, and we set up some chairs around the fridge. Sara and I sat there, taking pleasure in the people who took and brought. We were celebrating Michael's life. We were celebrating the power of community. We were sustaining life. It was beautiful.

—As told to Barbara Finkelstein

Selma Raven, 55, is a special education itinerant teacher in New York City's public school system.

## The Way We Got Started

### Begin with the basics.

We met with the founders of two local fridges. We followed their guidelines and asked for donations of fresh produce. Now we also accept labeled, dated homemade meals.

### Never say never.

We pestered a Queens food pantry. They kept telling us our fridge wasn't big enough to receive donations. Then they asked if we could accept 600 USDA boxes. "Sure," I said. We worked with a church to distribute them.

### Create awareness.

Spread the news about your community fridge. Donations come in all sizes and types—be it a bunch of bananas, a bag of tangerines or some sandwiches. Anyone and everyone can help.