

## A Fresh Start

Inspired by their family's past, two high school sisters are tackling Houston's food issues

BY LIA GRABOWSKI

**W**hen Annie Zhu's parents first immigrated from China—before Annie and her twin sister Shirly were born—they relied on a program at a local grocery store that would give away excess food at the end of the week. And they were far from alone: More than a quarter of Houstonians live in food deserts with little to no access to healthy food options.

After Hurricane Harvey hit the Houston area in 2017, Annie helped repair a grocery store and was struck by how much food was wasted. "I realized I can't just wait for other people to take action," she says. "I have a need and a responsibility to step in." She, her sister, and a group of friends from their high school

started approaching farmers markets and other food sellers in the hope of getting food that would otherwise be discarded into the hands of people who need it, a way to address both food waste and insecurity in their city.

"We got a lot of 'no's,'" Annie recalls. Being a group of minors with no credentials of any kind made it hard to get their idea off the ground. But one student had an idea: They learned about Second Servings, a nonprofit in the Houston area with the same mission. "After we got connected with them and got to speak with them about our goals and plans, they lent us a hand and put us in contact with Trader Joe's and local bakeries like Breadman [Baking

Company]." Having the backing of an established organization made all the difference, and soon Fresh Hub Houston was up and running. To get the word out, Annie and Shirly coded an app to notify people of their monthly events.

One of the key factors from Fresh Hub's inception was to treat people who use the service with respect—they're always referred to as "clients" and the set-up mimics shopping at a grocery store as much as possible. The team also focuses their attention on fresh items like produce and baked goods, noting that most of what's given out at food banks and homeless shelters are shelf-stable items like canned goods.

Starting out, the Fresh Hub process





Annie (left) and Shirly were named the First Lady's Youth Volunteer Rising Stars; at the 2020 Texas Governor's Volunteer Awards.

looked something like this: Representatives from the organization reached out to Second Servings to establish dates and locations for an event, then contacted the Houston Health Department to get clearance. Afterwards, they updated their app and sent out text message reminders to all of the clients who had signed up to be notified. To reach a wider audience, the group put out yard signs to advertise events and used social media to their advantage, creating videos of previous events to post on YouTube and share to other platforms. The morning of an event, volunteers picked up food from grocery stores and bakeries around Houston and volunteers formed assembly lines to organize and package bags. Clients signed in to get a headcount and contact information for future events, then moved through the space to choose the items they wanted to take home.

But of course, all of that changed when Covid-19 hit. "We very quickly realized

that the pandemic worsened the situation for vulnerable people, so there was an even greater need."

When lockdowns eliminated in-person events, the team dropped off bags of groceries at apartments. As things got better, they switched to a drive-through model that they've since stuck with, working within restrictions to build bags and offer contactless pick-up for clients.

The community has rallied around the organization, providing donations and volunteers for events. "I've been blown away from all the support we've been getting," Annie says. "More and more people in my high school have learned about food insecurity and that's something I'm really glad to be a part of. I think the pandemic was a huge hardship, but it was a chance for us to come together more." Prior to Annie and Shirly's high school graduation in 2021, Fresh Hub had collected more than 10,000 pounds of food from grocery stores and bakeries around Houston

and put it in the hands of more than 1,400 Houstonians in need.

Their work garnered national attention. In early 2021, Annie was named as one of twenty-five honorees for the annual Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. "It's so humbling to see that other people appreciate the work Shirly and I have done, it's very energizing and makes me excited to keep on doing the work." Annie hopes that it will encourage others to not be afraid to step out of their comfort zone or to ask for help—a lot of her success, she says, came from asking more experienced people.

As for the future of Fresh Hub, Annie and Shirly are leaving it in good hands as they head to college—Stanford and Harvard, respectively—where both are interested in studying computer science and Shirly hopes to incorporate public policy or sociology. They've handed Fresh Hub off to a new group of leadership and hope it will continue to grow.