

Nourishing Bethesda's Fifth Anniversary Celebration
Remarks by Founding Executive Director, John F. Ross, abridged
10/8/25

Thank you, Giulia. It's a real pleasure to work with you and all our board members.

And greetings and salutations everybody! And WELCOME to Nourishing Bethesda's Fifth Anniversary celebration.

To kick things off, I'd like to present our brand new video....

Today we celebrate a milestone: the fifth anniversary of Nourishing Bethesda. It's a miracle, really, if you think about it. A handful of us at St. John's Norwood Church in Bethesda decided to tackle one of the country's MOST pernicious issues—food insecurity—during one of the country's MOST difficult crises—the pandemic. STATCAST odds of success: 0 percent.

Yet here we are today. That idea we had would grow, flower, and thrive until five years later we are operating out of 11 locations, serving more than 7,000 of our neighbors in need every month, and handing out—cumulatively--more than 2.2 million pounds of food. I'm not going to lie—it's not always been easy.

HOW did this happen? That's an easy one: It's because of YOU. All of you. Every single one of you here today, and others in our community, made this happen. Every donor who writes a check, every volunteer who gives an hour, every group that packs snack bags, every person who donates a can of food or says a prayer for our neighbors in need. Every grocery store and farmstand employee who decided

to direct food away from the landfill to give to us. Every farmer who sends some of their crop to us. The public servant who takes care that our government grants run smoothly.

I am humbled every day when I witness so MANY repeated acts of generosity, selflessness, commitment. EVERY day.

All of you took a journey to get here—I'm not talking about the rainy car ride tonight but metaphorically: you decided to open your hearts to the possibility that YOUR actions matter, that OUR community can become a better place. My particular journey—as many of you know—involved a near fatal car crash that landed me in the ICU for a month. Each of our journeys here are different, but they have all involve opening up to caring about others... to MAKING a difference.

Because you see, there's a HUGE gulf between WANTING something to change—and the ACT of making those changes happen. The very act of you coming here tonight is a direct statement of your principles: that you won't stand for the tragic reality that 27,000 children are food insecure in Montgomery County. Every dollar that you give is a vote to make our community a better place. Every time you volunteer is a statement that you believe our community can be a better place where ALL of its residents have enough healthy food to put on their table. That NO ONE should go hungry. That all of us are worthy of respect.

What Nourishing Bethesda has done, what WE have done, is to translate HOPING into ACTION. We are a FORCE. And by all of us working together we have created something extraordinary: one of Montgomery County's biggest success stories since the pandemic. This is indeed something to celebrate.

But my friends, this celebration does come with a sobering reality: our continued growth and success is a clear and present indication that food insecurity is growing worse not better.

I'll put in bluntly: COMPASSION and EMPATHY are under assault.

Montgomery County is a perfect storm of federal worker layoffs, the ongoing shutdown, cuts in Medicaid and Snap Benefits, low wages, promised cuts in supportive housing, not to mention the high cost of food and housing.

This year MoCo has seen an unemployment rate that's 8 times the national average.

In our County, 35 percent of households—more than one out three—have felt food insecurity in the past year. Just THINK about that.

I'm dating myself here, but I remember the news stories in the 1960's about seniors eating DOG FOOD to survive. We've made so many strides since then—but much of that is under attack today.

Another factoid: 22 percent of Montgomery County residents are suffering from SEVERE food insecurity. Empty refrigerators and cupboards. These families struggle EVERY DAY with how to put healthy food on the table. And many just can't.

Do you know WHAT that 22 percent represents? 820,000 adults in the DMV suffering from severe food insecurity. On what PLANET is that acceptable? Don't believe me? Look at the Capital Area Food Bank's just released 2025 Hunger Report.

Is that acceptable? C'mon, is that acceptable? NO.

And continued cuts from this administration promise to make this FAR, FAR worse in the coming years. We are seeing it now on the ground. We're up 36 percent in the number of families from a year ago. And the last few weeks is the busiest we've ever seen, far exceeding the numbers at the PEAK of the pandemic.

Make no mistake, NOW is the time to step up. NOW is the time to ACT. We NEED all of you to pitch in.

I want to read a note from Andrew Friedson, our County Council representative. He couldn't be here tonight because he's doing a live TV candidate's forum.

Dear Friends:

I am so very sorry to miss tonight's anniversary celebration for a community-based cause so near and dear to my heart. As your neighbor, your Councilmember and your biggest cheerleader, I am so proud and so grateful to have experienced the growth of Nourishing Bethesda from the very beginning when John Ross, Rev. Derse and a small group of St John's Norwood church leaders joined me on a zoom call in the early months of

Covid and asked what can we do right here in our community to address the biggest challenges we face. With a big idea and even bigger hearts, you've put your faith into action over these past 5 years and helped our community live up to its namesake, Bethesda, Beit Chesed, a House of Lovingkindness.

Leveraging an interfaith coalition and public, private, and nonprofit partners, you're proving every week, for 260 weeks and counting (!), that there isn't a problem in our community that can't be solved by the people in our community. Thank you for lighting a candle rather than cursing the darkness and for inspiring me every day.

We're going to close the raffle tables at 7:30. There's still time to buy tickets. So when you buy a raffle ticket and please do—please buy many!—don't think about it as a chance to get a terrific prize, though we have some wonderful ones, think instead that you are throwing a lifeline to your neighbors in need and that you are enabling us to provide some of the healthy wonderful produce, eggs, and shelf stable food you see here today. But perhaps most important the act of buying a raffle ticket is an act of compassion, a statement that you care about your community, that you will fight alongside all of us. To turn HOPING into ACTION.