

GI Charles McJilton: Creating Japan's first food bank

CHARLES MCJILTON: I often tell people even a baker can change the world. If you think that the impact that he or she may have on the products that they serve and the memories in that process. And it isn't always the big things. Oftentimes I feel my work is like, you know, throwing that stone into a lake and you never see where the ripples end on the other edge. You just know that hopefully they're going to travel there and carry on and that's good enough. That's good enough.

RAMA CHAKAKI: That was Charles McJilton, our guest on today's episode. Charles is the founder and CEO of Second Harvest, Japan's first nationwide food bank, which embodies the value of ongaeshi, the Japanese word for giving back.

I'm Rama Chakaki, and you're listening to Innovate with Purpose, the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai.

[INTRO STING]

RAMA CHAKAKI: Charles is an American entrepreneur who has lived in Japan for more than thirty years. In 2003, Charles launched Second Harvest to help redirect the six million tonnes of food discarded each year toward feeding those who are in need.

CHARLES MCJILTON: Our slogan is "food for all people" that we want to make food accessible to everybody who needs it.

CHARLES MCJILTON: You know, poverty becomes a different issue or hunger is a different issue when you're just thinking about it behind your own closed door, in your apartment or your house, then when it's a reality right in front of you.

Coming into my role here at Second Harvest, as the founder, originally was just here to kill time until I was going to move back to the United States.

But if you've ever seen It's A Wonderful Life with Jimmy Stewart. You know, he can never leave Bedford Falls. This has been my experience with Japan. Every time I'm ready to leave, I get pulled back.

When I'm doing my work, it's a way of voting, if you will, not a political thing, but a way of saying this is the society I want to live in. This is the society that I want to pass along to somebody else that as long as I'm here, my country, my community is Japan.

RAMA CHAKAKI: After operating for more than a decade, you decided to build on the original plan for Second Harvest. You still wanted to distribute food to those in need, but you wanted the community to be more involved. So in 2018, you proposed your new plan to Expo Live. How was that?

CHARLES MCJILTON: That whole experience blew my mind.

I got the email a couple weeks later saying, yeah, we gave you the money. I'm like, what? Yeah. Congratulations. I'm like, you kidding me? I know I cried. I know I cried at that point.

RAMA CHAKAKI: In October 2019, with the funds from Expo, you launched this new kind of food drive, which you called marugohan: a Japanese term made up of the words maru, meaning food, and gohan meaning circle. And at this market, people don't pay money to shop for food but instead they do a good deed. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

CHARLES MCJILTON: We opened marugohan in October 2019. We had a good press conference there. People came out, they saw it, and it was moving along for the first six months as we wanted it to. Process wise, you know, we had things we still had to work on as with any new venture is going to happen.

And then COVID happened. On the day my son was born on April 11th, 2020 was the very first day of my 20 years here that I had to turn away people because we couldn't handle them.

RAMA CHAKAKI: So it was the very first time since Second Harvest's founding that you couldn't serve the crowd who showed up at the market. That must have been hard.

That was a tough day. You know, I had to take my partner to the hospital that morning. They wouldn't let me stay in the hospital. Uh, she said, just go to work. And then we just had too many people coming for food that day. And we couldn't handle them in the small space of marugohan market. And I had to make a decision within 20 minutes of starting, telling people we can't help you today.

And then a week later, the following week, we made the official decision to shut down marugohan and just go through a different drive through system where we just gave people a bag of food.

And it was hard because I felt a deep responsibility to Expo Live.

Here I've been selected for this groundbreaking project and stuff, and we had to shut it down and you go, you know, you had to shut down because you have an obligation to the people that you serve here. And the people that come here to keep them safe. But at the same time, it's like, here's your dream and what you wanted to happen, having to be put on hold and you don't know how long to be put on hold. And so, yeah, that was a hard one.

MUSIC

RAMA CHAKAKI: Seven months later, and despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Second Harvest was able to host a food drive in Okinawa, a region in Japan with a child poverty rate of about 30%.

CHARLES MCJILTON: And so in November we didn't have enough food. We thought "ugh what to do?" I said: "what if we do a food drive at the food distribution?" We ask each person to bring in a canned good or some type of food item. Of course my partner says: "you know people are hungry, right? They're coming in for food for you.

I said, yeah, she says good luck with that. Kind of like, are you crazy? Who holds a food drive at a food distribution? Who asks people in need of food to bring a can of goods? You gotta be crazy.

MUSIC

CHARLES MCJILTON: But anyways, there's a little girl comes in, she's about elementary grade, second grade. Just she looks like angry at the world. Like, why am I here? And she kind of shoves her can in my face.

Cause she goes here and I'm like I said, well, thanks. Hey, do you know? She basically said why am I giving this?

I said, you're going to help someone else. Your canned good is going to go help another family.

And at that moment, she turned, looked up at her mom and said, mom, you are so kind.

As a parent, to get an unprovoked compliment from your own child, will just go right to your heart.

You know, the mother looked a little bit embarrassed, but she was, you know, you could tell that internally she'd feel happy and that child learned through experience, I can also give back, I can also pay it forward to somebody else.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And it's small moments like those that lead to the ripples of change that Charles was talking about at the beginning.

CHARLES MCJILTON: Sometimes nonprofits like us, people ask that legitimate question, tell me about the impact you had.

And we go, yeah, we don't measure those things, because one I don't know if I'd be able to really with integrity to quantify that, that my box of food, my meal that I provided to this person changed their life.

But I do know that, you know, when we connect people that aren't normally connected, food companies that don't know about welfare institutions or, you know, people in a financial company that don't come in contact with people that are below the poverty line, or people in need. There can be a change there that I never see, but you can sense it.

MUSIC

CHARLES MCJILTON: What makes me happy is when I'm sitting there, you know, getting a canned good from that little girl, and seeing the change in her face. You know, those are small little times to me that, you know, remind me that yeah, we are all connected in our own different ways and stuff. And so a chance to come to Expo live, to see that in that context with people in different countries, doing really incredible, amazing things in my mind, reminds me you're not alone, you're not alone. We're not alone. You know?

RAMA CHAKAKI: Thank you Charles.

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RAMA CHAKAKI: “Innovate with Purpose” is the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai. Innovation can come from anywhere, to everyone.

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