



John Litten sleeps well at night. Why? Because he knows his work is making a difference. “I’ve been in nonprofit work my entire career,” John explained. “I caught the ‘helping people’ bug in college.”

John Litten and Sister
Kathleen Kilbane

John is the Executive Director of the West Side Catholic Center, one of the Greater Cleveland Food Bank’s very first partner agencies. Since 1977, the West Side Catholic Center has been serving people in need on Cleveland’s west side in multiple ways including clothing, shelter, and food.

In 1977, John explained, “The local churches were having problems with making ends meet. People were knocking on their doors and they needed help handling the requests and helping people in need. So, they all banded together and created this one place where people could go, and that became the West Side Catholic Center.”

At the helm was Sister Kathleen Kilbane, who is now considered the founder and first director of the Center. “The Sisters of St. Joseph came in here and really made the place what it is,” John said. “Sister Kilbane set the tone for how the West Side Catholic Center is today. For her, this place was about giving people the things they needed, but, it was really about that person-to-person contact – that face-to-face meeting. Just getting to know them. Just being a listener. Acknowledging that the place just simply needed to be there for people, whatever that meant for that person.”

Now, John tries to emulate Sister Kilbane in his work with the Center. “Everything is right here. My office door is the furthest door from the entrance and I love that because I have to

walk through all of it to get here,” John describes with a smile. “So, every day, I am in the middle of it. I can go help serve a meal if I want to. The work is right here. It’s hard for an ivory tower point of view to set in.”

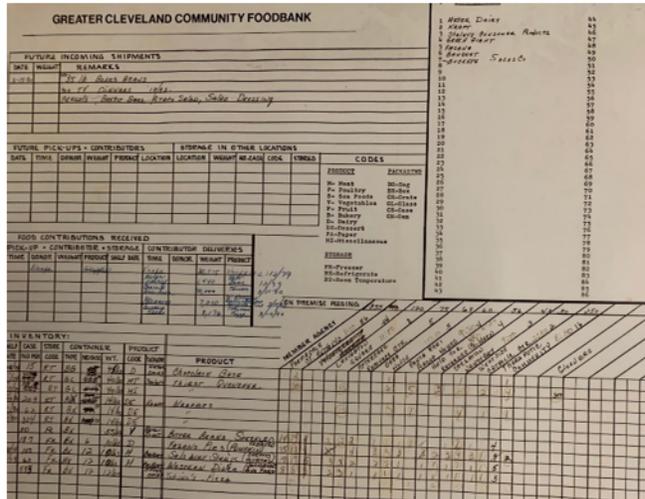
The West Side Catholic Center serves about 7,000 people per year in a variety of ways, including food. Through their partnership with the Food Bank, they’ve been able to expand their services over the last forty years to provide not only more food, but also more nutritious food to the clients they serve.



John visits with a client at the West Side Catholic Center.

“It feels awesome to be with an agency that has been with the Food Bank from the start because it’s a partner that I have believed in and trusted my entire career in this line of work. I always get good information. I always get good feedback,” John said, “Fast-forward to today and we are taking full advantage of the Food Bank’s adjustment to making meals healthier. I take a lot of pride in that. We do the produce distributions here. It all gets used. It’s been nice to be able to move on from the processed food on the original order form to what we’re providing today. We know so much

more now about how the food people are eating contributes to health factors later. We know the dignity of giving people healthy food and also helping them not have other problems down the road.”



The Food Bank’s first partner agency order form, which included the Center.

Before working at the West Side Catholic Center, John was the Executive Director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, another partner of the Food Bank. “I’ve always appreciated the working relationship with the Food Bank,” John explained. “The Food Bank is so hands-on with their partner agencies. I imagine it was that way in the beginning, too. There’s this wonderful plugging in and collaboration that you don’t see between nonprofits all the time.”

But even beyond food, John and the team at the West Side Catholic Center work to continue to legacy of their founder, Sister Kilbane. “She saw, as we see today, that when this place is

at its best, it's a mutually beneficial relationship for everyone – the staff member, the volunteer, the client. It's about the experience," John remembers with a thoughtful smile. "She'd say, 'oh, this client taught me a lot.' She would not talk about how many people we've helped or what we served, but it was about what 'they taught me.' It's about a give and take, not so much about us helping them."

John is the perfect man to be continuing this work. When asked about why he's committed to the field, his answer was simple. "Everyone has value and everyone deserves the basics. I just want to help make that happen." And make it happen he does! The West Side Catholic Center churns out meals, ensures Clevelanders in need are fed, and is an overall go-getting machine. "We pick the highest hanging fruit here," John said. "It's all about moving the needle in the right direction. We try to move people in a direction and to a place they haven't recently been in. Whether it's just starting to complete job applications or just build some computer skills or some financial literacy skills."

Two years ago, when John started his job, he thought he'd be comfortable by now. The Center recently finished a large renovation. They've just opened Ohio City Pizzeria, a great place to eat and a job-skills training center. But, somehow, he's not comfortable. He still wants to do more and find better ways to serve people in need. That's how he sees the future of the West Side Catholic Center and the Food Bank.

"We talk about sustaining or growing our agencies, but at the same time, our missions are to put ourselves out of business," John explained. "So, in forty years, hopefully we solved some aspect of this stuff. Hopefully we solved it and moved onto something else, whatever that might be. Or there's still a need, but we've figured out an aspects of it so as to make others' situations or access better. I hope in 40 years, that the Food Bank and the West Side Catholic Center would continue to be doing what it takes to remind people of the need, how we're solving it, and how much work that takes."



After 42 years of serving the community, it's hard to imagine Cleveland without the West Side Catholic Center. Because of the work of Sister Kilbane to start the Center and John's work to continue her vision, thousands of Clevelanders are clothed, fed, and sheltered every single day. The Food Bank is privileged to play a small part in their work.

Sister Kathleen Kilbane at the opening of the West Side Catholic Center's Lorain Avenue Facility, 1982.