



Since 2002, **Melvin Hodge** has devoted his Saturdays to feeding people. Since his retirement, operating Manna Food from Heaven has turned into an almost full-time job. Still, Melvin makes the trek downtown to 2100 Lakeside each week to prepare more than 1,500 meals for men and women residing in the two largest shelters in Cleveland.

In 1992, Melvin first got a taste of working in hunger relief. “My first church brought me to this work,” he remembered. “We started doing a holiday give back to Zelma George for a few years. Then, in 1997, a young lady asked if we could go downtown and feed the people sleeping on the streets. At that time, there weren’t a lot of shelters. So, we just started cooking and taking food over there.”

From 1997 to 2002, cooking and delivering meals to Cleveland’s homeless transformed into a ministry that feeds thousands of Cleveland’s most vulnerable every month. “It’s not work,” Melvin said with a smile. For him, it’s a calling. “I did this work for 15 years while I was working. If I could have done Manna for 30 years and got paid, it would have been my job.”

“We’re a hot meal program,” Melvin explained, “We normally cook three to four times a month with the help of volunteers. All of our meals are homemade. The recipes are just from growing up cooking.”



Melvin is greatly influenced by growing up around great cooks. “My father and mother and my wife’s mother and aunt were big influences. We try to do everything homemade. We prepare healthy choices,” Melvin explained.

Beyond cooking delicious nutritious meals for thousands of people every month, Melvin and his team of dedicated volunteers, including his wife Debra, provide the gift of choice to people who might not have that same experience often. “We serve them with a smile,” Melvin said, “Like if I go out to a restaurant.”

Since founding Manna in 2002, Melvin has partnered with the Greater Cleveland Food Bank to get the vast majority of the food he prepares. “The Food Bank has been a blessing to Manna,” he explained. “If it wasn’t for the Food Bank, Manna wouldn’t be able to feed like we feed now, it’s just a blessing – 90% of my food comes from the Food Bank.”

And the Food Bank is blessed to have Melvin and partners like him at the front lines in the fight against hunger. Without our network of nearly 1,000 partner programs, the hundreds of thousands of people in need in Northeast Ohio wouldn’t have the nutritious food they need every day.

Manna Food from Heaven benefits not just from food provided by the Food Bank, but also from the Harvest for Hunger Campaign. Part of the money raised in the campaign is turned into partner agency grants, which allows them to receive more food from the Food Bank at no cost. “The grant I get from Harvest for Hunger is a big help,” Melvin said, “Everyone at the Food Bank has been a blessing to us.”

In 2006, Manna was recognized as the Partner Agency of the Year by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. Melvin’s selfless commitment to cooking with love and serving food with a smile is an important part of ensuring the people served by the Food Bank and our partners feel welcome. “It was an honor to be Agency of the Year,” he explained, “but I would do all of this work without all of that.”

And Melvin feels that the clients respect him in return. “The respect that the clients give us is great. If there’s something that I need, people are willing to help. Not everyone will say thank you, but every now and then someone will come back and say ‘thank you for the meal,’ and you know



Melvin Hodge poses with Food Bank staff with his Partner Agency of the Year Award, 2006.

they are sincere.” But even beyond the clients Melvin feeds, he has earned respect and encouragement from his community.

In early 2018, Manna’s van was on its last legs. Melvin was worried since without a working van, picking up food from the Food Bank and coordinating his meal production would have



Melvin stands proudly with Manna’s van.

been virtually impossible. Then the truly impossible happened. “My church surprised me with a new van. It revives me when things like that happen. It renews my spirit in doing what I need to do.”

Melvin hopes that the Food Bank, and Manna Food from Heaven, will be serving well into the future. “I hope and pray that the Food Bank will be around

and will expand. I hope that more people will donate to the Food Bank,” he explained. “When people donate to the Food Bank, it helps agencies like Manna.”

As for Melvin’s personal involvement in Manna, he’s unsure of what the next 40 years looks like. “In 40 years, I’ll be 104,” Melvin said with a laugh. “If God gave me that strength, maybe not 1,500 meals, but I could be serving just one person, that would be good.”

“He’s a very caring individual,” said Debra, Melvin’s wife of 46 years. “Serving is in his blood and his spirit.”

The Food Bank is lucky to have Melvin and Manna Food from Heaven as a partner in fighting hunger. His commitment to serving the community is remarkable and his giving spirit is infectious.



Melvin and Debra Hodge at the Food Bank’s Agency Pickup Area