

# Bold(h)er

## Solving an Impossible Problem

### **Leah Lizarondo:**

For the average family, we waste about 25% of the food we buy. Basically, when you go to the grocery and come out with four bags of food, just throw one away. That's how much food we'll be wasting.

### **Lisa Bragg:**

Food waste. It costs all of us in more ways than you might have thought when you think about the science experiments in your fridge, or when you scrape the good food into the organics or garbage. There's also food waste from hotels, restaurants, bakeries, and manufacturers. Leah Lizarondo found out how much waste and decided to rescue the food. I'm Lisa Bragg and this is Bold(h)er stories of and for women who stand out brought to you by BMO for Women.

Leah, you're an entrepreneur, you're a tech founder, but there's a shocking statistic that we're all part of that changed your life.

### **Leah Lizarondo:**

You know, changed my life for the last seven years, for sure. That statistic was a statistic that I read about in 2012 through a report from the National Resources Defense Council in the United States, the NRDC. They released a report called Wasted. It was written by Dana Gunders. I think we all have an idea that we waste some food, but it was the first time I saw this shocking number that we waste 40% of our food supply.

### **Leah Lizarondo:**

Reading that, and at that time I was a food writer, I was really just shocked at the extent of food waste, which is when you say 40%, that's almost like picturing big farmland and saying, "I'm just going to burn half of this." That really sat with me for a long time in 2012.

### **Lisa Bragg:**

That's 2012. You decided that you were going to solve one of the world's biggest problems. Is that what happened?

### **Leah Lizarondo:**

Yes, of course. That's it, and it's done.

**Lisa Bragg:**

That day I'm going to do this. How do you come to that decision that I'm going to solve this huge problem?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

It wasn't as instantaneous as it seems. That was 2012. There was a really kind of buildup of urgency as I continued to work in the food industry and food writing and seeing little bits and pieces of reminders of it. You go to an event and you see this big buffet and you know that looking at the people who are there, that this is absolutely not going to all get consumed.

Then you remember that statistic or reading about that, or I have friends in the restaurant industry, and everyone tells me, "I hate being on the last shift. I have to throw away the food." Or like a friend who worked at a bake shop and at the end of the day would take the whole, whatever is left on the shelf, put it in a bag and then bring it to a church that's on our way home.

Or reading articles like, "We know of this store that puts all of their excess food behind in the dumpster and they pour bleach on it." Or people who do only subsist through getting food from the garbage, which is really something that is, through all of those years, all of these stories. And realizing that the extent of hunger, even in developed countries, is so much that it became ... As in the four years in between launching 412 Food Rescue and reading this article, it was a slow build.

Finally, around 2015 after seeing all of the food rescue organizations that I know of, there's one in Braddock, there's one in every city that I would go to, they're very small and grassroots to very big, but there was no way to scale any of them. What really happened was, well, we have these transport networks that exist and they are beginning to deliver food. At that time, it wasn't so common. Why can't we do that for food surplus and prevent it from being food waste?

It was really a slow build to this innovation that really isn't so new because we know these food delivery services exist. I think the innovation for us is how we use it.

**Lisa Bragg:**

Let's break it down though. What do you actually do? You've taken technology and now you've made something that is an app that helps rescue food. Tell us about what it actually is that you do.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. Basically, so after reading that report and seeing these small reminders and instances of food going to waste, one of the things we tried to figure out is, why is it happening? Why can't we redirect this food? Looking at the supply chain, looking at research that shows where in the supply chain food waste is happening, surprisingly, it's really mostly in our homes. But the next largest segment of it is retail, which is anywhere before it gets to our homes.

Grocery stores, restaurants. The problem with trying to recover this food, and that's almost half of all food waste happens here, is that there're so many restaurants, so many grocery stores, so many events, so many institutions that have cafeterias. The app really works exactly like a DoorDash or an

Uber Eats or an Instacart, in that it takes where food is and brings it to where it's needed. It's delivered by a driver that is mobilized through this app.

The app works exactly the same way, except instead of a food order that I made, it is the daily food surplus from a grocery store. It is assigned to a nonprofit or charity and then it is driven by a volunteer that has the app. We've done this since 2016, starting here in Pittsburgh. Now we are in 12 cities, including Vancouver in Canada. This whole network has redirected 40 million pounds of food from going to waste to feeding those who need it.

**Lisa Bragg:**

Applause, applause, applause. That is amazing. That's quick growth then too, to go from one city, one pilot, now to all this. How do you do that? How do you take one of the world's biggest problems and actually make it happen? How did you do it?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I think it's when you see possibilities, you have no choice but to do it, otherwise you can't sleep at night. How did we do it? I think it's one step at a time. It started with, okay. Well, I know my friend who works for the bakery takes the food to the church on her way home. We know that these small food rescue organizations work all over the world, whether it's through small trucks or their own small network of drivers.

What if we audaciously bet that if we have a more organized app and an approach that is looking towards scale, that we can do it? We created the app. Again, if you have ever driven for DoorDash, or you can imagine what a DoorDash drivers sees, it's exactly the same thing. We launched it in Pittsburgh. We told all of our friends. In the beginning, it was our friends and our friends of friends.

I remember the first day when I was working and doing all the dispatching and we put out a food rescue opportunity and saw someone take it, that was not someone I knew. I remember thinking at that moment, "Wow. Someone downloaded the app and it's not a friend of mine." It just kept on going and keeping on growing, and soon it was mostly people I didn't know. We just kept them going, recruiting, marketing this, talking to people about it, making sure we raise awareness about this opportunity.

I think the magic sauce is the fact that we have forgotten that everyone wants to do something. Everyone wants to give back and volunteer. They just don't know how, or they don't feel like they have enough time, or we just don't catch them at the moment that they're free. With food rescue, because there's rescues happening every day at every hour, every week, you have so many options to say yes. I think that's how we did it.

We have broken down volunteering into these micro moments that can take as little as 20 minutes. Yet, at the end of it, you feel this enormous sense of reward that you've done something completely useful and in service of someone else.

**Lisa Bragg:**

That's awesome. People are helping you change the world just 20 minutes at a time. Who are your volunteers? Is there a certain segment or is it everyone showing up?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

For different times of day, it's different kinds of people, as you can imagine. On a weekday around 9:00 to 5:00, we typically get early retirees. These are folks that have the flexibility of time during the workday and they are really our power force during these times. Also, mothers, mothers with children under five that are not in the workforce and are doing the caregiving for the family. They're the ones during that time too.

Then on the weekends, then we get everyone. We get all of us who work 9:00 to 5:00, the families that do food rescues together. For every time segment of the day, there's a different group of people that's taking the lead.

**Lisa Bragg:**

What are the stories you hear from your volunteers? I always love volunteer stories, because they're always the magic that really ties in what the purpose of the operation is with the end user. They're that in-between and their stories are often gold. What do you hear from them?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Oh, so many stories. Actually, there was just a feature in the Wall Street Journal recently about this volunteer that had just moved to Pittsburgh and really had no friends here yet, no connections. She decided to pick up the app and volunteer and drop it off at a senior housing facility. She did that and she met one of the seniors that was living there and struck up a conversation that has evolved into this close friendship.

She would not only deliver food to the senior housing facility; she would take this newfound friend to the grocery store because she didn't have a ride. It became their weekly routine where they would have coffee and go to the grocery and they developed this friendship. That's just one really heartwarming story of someone who just moved to a place, was wanting connections and did food rescue and got the friendship of a lifetime.

**Lisa Bragg:**

Oh, that's so great.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

There are stories that are just ... It gives you faith in the world. One of our drivers, John, would text us sometimes. One of the texts that he sent us was, "I just dropped this food off at a shelter." John is, I would say, probably in his 70s. He said that in the shelter, there was this 94-year-old man, and he delivered food and the 94-year-old man saw him he said, "You know what, young man." He laughed because no one calls him a young man. "Without you, I will not eat today."

**Leah Lizarondo:**

It's just so simple. He feels like, John feels like, he didn't really do anything except pick up food and bring it to one place. To that other person, it was the difference between having food and not having food, which for John it was less than an hour of his time.

**Lisa Bragg:**

It sounds so simple when you say that. He just picks up the food and delivers it to someone else who needs the food. That's simple.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yes.

**Lisa Bragg:**

But it's so complex, isn't it?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

It is a logistically complex thing. Hopefully, for the individual that is doing the food rescue, it's not complex. That is our goal, to make the experience easy on all ends, but things happen. So far, one of the things that I'm extremely proud of is that we have a service level that is extremely high. It is 99%. We only miss 1% of available rescues to us across this network. That's a difficult feat.

Some commercial food delivery services perform at 95%, and so I always tell my team, "You have to be proud of that."

**Lisa Bragg:**

People call you a tech founder, but I love this quote from you where you say, "Technology is important, but it's the power of collective action that will drive massive change."

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I always tell my team, "We're not a software company. We are a company that enables interactions. The software, it's a tool to do that."

**Lisa Bragg:**

So many of us live in a world of abundance and so we end up throwing out the lettuce when we don't eat it. We have good intentions when we buy it, but two weeks later, it's there in the fridge. Or we give our children so much food to go to school and then half of it is left there. Any suggestions on what we can do ourselves?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. Ever since I started doing this, I've been of course hyper aware of my own practices. I was a food writer and I also worked at an urban farm, so I thought that I was careful enough, but I've changed a few more things that has allowed me to cut down on food waste even more. The first one is I really grocery shop once a week and probably would make a little tiny trip somewhere in the middle there if I forgot something. But I only typically buy enough for the week.

I have not gone to a big box warehouse style store in a long time, because I've realized that I would buy things that I would eventually not use or not use fast enough. I'm also a constant refrigerator arranger. Meaning, I keep on putting things out to the front that need to be consumed right away. I make sure I know where everything is, so I don't forget something. That in itself has been a big minimizer of food waste.

Then the third is I freeze everything. It's really only few things you can't freeze. The quickest way to preserve something, a vegetable that's about to turn, but you know you really can't use, is to blanch and freeze. Some things you don't even have to blanch. My freezer is my friend. Before I do my grocery shop, I look at everything in my fridge as well and make sure that I know what's there so that I'm not buying too much.

Those are the things that I do on a weekly basis that really help minimize the food waste in my house. I am a consumer of leftovers. We eat all leftovers, at least I do. Yeah. It's been great and just doing that has completely reduced our food waste here at home.

**Lisa Bragg:**

You haven't solved the who eats the leftover problem entirely in your house then.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah.

**Lisa Bragg:**

It sounds like just you.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I'm self-elected to be that person.

**Lisa Bragg:**

Yeah. That's great. It's hard with the children though, isn't it? Because you have three children.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I do. Yes.

**Lisa Bragg:**

How do you get them to be aware of it? How are you helping? I don't know how old they are. Are they really young?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

No. My children are 16, 14, and then I do have an eight-year-old who is the youngest one. He's also my pickiest eater. My teenagers pretty much would eat anything and so I'm really lucky in that sense.

They pretty much eat everything on their plate, each meal. Again, feeling lucky there. It's my eight-year-old where I have to be really careful. It's easier to control his lunch. What you said earlier about packing too much for the school lunch.

That's been a challenge for me when it wasn't the pandemic and they weren't doing remote learning because he would come home with half his sandwich uneaten. But because I'm working from home and he's eating lunch here, I can pretty much control the portions that he has, to the point where he doesn't really leave anything on his plate. That has been a boon in this strange year, but hopefully I have it better now when he goes back to school.

**Lisa Bragg:**

I have some stats too, that are probably part of the stats that really started this for you. 80 billion pounds of food is thrown away. 40% of the U.S. food supply is wasted and 1600 U.S. dollars because we have a lot of Canadians here who listen to us, so it's even more, worth of produce per family is wasted. What do you think when you hear those stats?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. It's actually 62 million tons of food get wasted every year, and yeah 1600 U.S. dollars, basically you just throw that away. I think the other visual is if you have four grocery bags full of food, just leave one behind. 25% of the food that we buy personally in our homes are wasted. Again, these are just big numbers and the other big numbers and major statistics are that food waste is one of the leading causes of greenhouse gas emissions anywhere.

It's almost eight to 10% of greenhouse gas emissions are because of food waste. This is everywhere from wasting the resources that we put into food production, to the transport of the food and the refrigeration, and then at the end of its life in the landfill. Even if hunger is not something that you're experiencing, it impacts us all because it is one of the biggest causes of climate change.

**Lisa Bragg:**

Yeah. Because our food waste, it's filling up our landfills and so many places are looking for somewhere else to put more food and more food and more food. Except on the other side of the spectrum, we have people who are really hungry or just don't have enough. They're food insecure.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Correct. Yes. Recovering or redirecting food surplus really has two impacts. The first is to the individual or family that you have supported that day. The second is controlling its impact on the environment.

**Lisa Bragg:**

You called the tool, a disruptive innovation to reduce food waste and hunger. I love that, disruptive. Let's break this, let's shake this attitude of waste, waste, waste. How do you feel at the end of the day when you have those thoughts, that you've made this kind of product?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

The biggest bet we have made is really all about seeing that people will step up and do this, and that really is it. We know that logistically it will work if we have enough drivers, because we've seen other companies do it. The problem is just, how do we make sure now that we have enough drivers so that we are an efficient operation? For us, that is the ongoing challenge. Of course, there are technology challenges, but truly, it's all about engaging people.

**Lisa Bragg:**

You've gotten this going. You're in so many places now. Where do you want to take it?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

We have this thing called Vision 2030, which is tracking with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. There are 17 goals and sub-goals under those 17 major goals. SDG 12 is responsible production and consumption. SDG 12.3, that goal is to reduce food waste by 50% globally by 2030. We track with that and we say, "Okay. The way we will contribute to this is to target 100 cities in 10 years."

To make sure that we scale food recovery, not only in the United States, but in as many places in the world as we can. We just finished some forecasting and projections. If we do achieve that, we will have almost 400,000 people driving food and moving over 600 million pounds of food. That's just a year. That's just for us the big vision and we are working very hard to get there.

**Lisa Bragg:**

I think people will be thinking right now, "Well, how do you actually make money when you're just moving food around?" How do you make money as a company?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. We are a nonprofit, but saying that, aside from philanthropic support and corporate support, when we work with other cities, we do engage them to help us sustain that technology by licensing it. We do have a licensing model. When we talk about 100 cities, this means working with 100 organizations all over the world to sustain this technology. There's a licensing model that we do have. We also do have several programs that are revenue-generating.

We work with farmers for a community-supported agriculture program, which means we buy their ugly food and resell it in the market. That generates revenue for us, and our food donors do participate in sustainability as well by contributing to this, to the redirection of food.

**Lisa Bragg:**

If I wanted this food recovery and redistribution network to come to my city or region, how do I help? Is there a way that people can get it to come to their area faster? Is there something they can lobby or something they can do?



**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. Most major cities have a food rescue food recovery organization. It might be small. The reason for the organization being smaller or relatively small compared to others, is probably they don't have technology that does allow them to scale. You do need technology to coordinate tens of thousands of drivers. This is why we know that Uber exists and DoorDash and Lyft. They've built big transport networks through mobilizing people through technology, and we do the same thing.

The best thing someone can do, who wants to bring this to their city, is find that food rescue organization, whether it's a small one or a large one, let them know about us and our platform. We would love to work with them. If you are also interested in starting your own organization, the founder of Vancouver Food Runners is an entrepreneur herself. Her name is Tristan Jagger. She is a mom of four. Used to work in the nonprofit world and decided that this was her next thing.

She launched Vancouver Food Runners in July of 2020, in the middle of the pandemic. I think the last I checked, they have over 700 volunteers, and have, in 2020 alone, recovered a quarter of a million pounds of food. This woman decided she's going to do it and she did it. Half a year, quarter of a million pounds of food. It's amazing. 700 volunteers.

**Lisa Bragg:**

I love how you're celebrating someone else, but that's amazing what you did too where you decided you weren't going to let one of the world's most impossible tasks go unserved on your watch. You set out. It's daunting to think that others have looked at this problem and have started it, and I'm glad more people are rallying to this and making it a bigger scale issue that we can finish this and get through it.

How do you steel yourself to think about pushing forward and not wait for someone else to tackle this issue?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I think it was less steeling myself, meaning that implies I understood what I was getting into. I really did not. I didn't start this with an idea of enormity of the undertaking. I knew that it was going to be not easy, but everything throughout this journey has surprised me starting with again, the number of people that have actually responded and downloaded the app, the amount of food that we've moved.

No projections that I made in 2015 is anywhere near where we are now, or even imagining that we would be in 12 cities when we launched this in 2015, that I would say in 2020/2021, that we would be in 12 cities. Or that we would even set another audacious goal of being in 100 cities by 2030. All of these just are pieces of momentum that have pushed us forward.

I have to say, the vision was there, but the way to get to it, while there is a process, the velocity of the momentum has continually surprised me. Yeah. I have to say that's true every single day.

**Lisa Bragg:**

You mentioned to me once when we were talking that it's literally sailing our ship as we build it. I say to my people in my company too, we're walking on a bridge before it's built, so let's figure it out as we go folks.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yes. Yes. You're an entrepreneur. That's the spirit of entrepreneurs. It's the ability to take that risk, but also having that vision that's far ahead, but also being able to take it one incremental step at a time.

**Lisa Bragg:**

What are the challenges that we're facing as humans on this planet with the amount of food waste that's going on?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

Yeah. I think I mentioned earlier even though we are fortunate enough to not be food insecure, food waste affects us all. It is one of the largest causes of greenhouse gas emissions. It is second only to road transport in what it contributes to the environment. If it were a country, it would be the third largest cause of greenhouse gas emissions. There is a lot about food waste and redirecting food waste that makes so much sense.

The first is we're not wasting the natural resources, the water and the land that we use to produce it. The second is we know that there are so many that are food insecure, and if we can redirect this food from feeding landfills to feeding people, that only makes sense. It is almost a moral responsibility. Then third, redirecting food waste is climate action. You're not only supporting those who are food insecure, you're supporting everyone.

**Lisa Bragg:**

That's so much that we could do. 40% of food is wasted, one in five are hungry. That's in the U.S., and I'm sure it's the same in Canada where so much is being wasted every single day.

**Leah Lizarondo:**

52% of our fruits and vegetables go to waste. It is actually one of the biggest food that is wasted. A lot of what we distribute are fresh fruits and vegetables. These are the food that is very hard to come by from food pantries and food shelves. When we do deliver this food, people are so grateful because it is hard to access this food. There is a paradox that we know exists, that families and individuals that can only access food through traditional hunger support, cannot access nutritionally dense food.

One of the things that we are extremely happy about, and our volunteers are too because they see it as they deliver it, is that people are really excited to see this food because it's fresh. It's not something from a can. It's not something that is full of preservatives, and we all have a right to that kind of food.

**Lisa Bragg:**

How do you keep passionate about this issue?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

What keeps me passionate are the people. Starting with my team, I have an amazing team who are equally passionate about the mission as I am. Every one of them is just ... I feel so lucky. I have the best team. I keep on saying this. That enthusiasm and commitment to the mission really drives this team to do better and better each day. Then I know that our entire team is completely inspired by the people who do this work.

All of the food rescue heroes in these 12 cities, and soon hopefully all over the world, when we see them picking up these rescues, we don't know them. We don't see these people, but we see them going up on the screen claim, claim, claim. It brings back your faith in the world. As I've said many times, someone is electing to give 20 minutes, an hour of their time to take food from this place and drive it to this place. It happens tens of thousands of times a year.

That keeps us going. I know what keeps our volunteers going is appreciation for the food donors that elect to not waste the food and instead redirect it to those in need. Then when they do drive and deliver the food, they see the gratitude, the happiness, the excitement, the connections that they make at the nonprofit, at the charity. It's all about all of these people working together that keeps the passion alive.

I always say that I think what keeps me going and what helps me make sure that I'm doing the best that I can is I don't want to disappoint anyone, not in my team, not the volunteer who's put their faith in this whole process and is giving their time, and not to the nonprofit or charity or the person that's receiving this food. That's it. When I wake up in the morning, I think of all the people.

**Lisa Bragg:**

On Bold(h)er, we always ask these three questions. What's the boldest thing you've ever done?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

What's the boldest thing I've ever done? Okay. That's an easy one. When I was 16, I was living ... I grew up in the Philippines and my dad had this subscription to National Geographic that I always remember we would get that yellow magazine. Then when I was 16, there was this edition that was devoted only to New York City. I remember looking at the pages and looking at how alive Manhattan looked and just the diversity and just the color.

It's almost like it was jumping out of the page. I remember pulling out the map of Manhattan, as you know, National Geographic would always have these maps. Before infographics were a thing, they were already doing that. I put it on my wall, and I said, "One day I'm going to live there." Less than a decade later, I had two suitcases, rode a plane and went to New York City. That was the boldest thing I've ever done.

It's been without regrets, not without pain, because I did leave everything I know and everyone I know to take that risk, but it was where I knew my life was going to go. Yeah. That's the boldest thing I've ever done.

**Lisa Bragg:**

When do you wish you were bolder?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

I think I always say, when you see possibilities, you cannot unsee them. You've already seen it, and so if you ignore it, it's almost like, how can you go to sleep at night? You've seen this possibility that you know is there. You just have to try. I think launching 412 Food Rescue, and then Food Rescue Hero, which is the technology platform, is the next boldest thing I've done. I'm almost always a yes person, let's try, let's see before I say no. In that sense I think with all humility I can say that I've always been a risk-taker.

**Lisa Bragg:**

What would you say to your 12-year-old self?

**Leah Lizarondo:**

You are going to go through many challenges, challenges you can't even imagine right now, and going through challenges in life is completely unavoidable. It's just the way life is. When you do encounter these challenges, I want you to know that everything passes. Even the biggest heartbreaks or the most difficult things that you feel like you cannot survive, if you take a deep breath and just let it pass through you and accept it, it will pass and life will go on. Then a new page opens up and you can start all over again.

**Lisa Bragg:**

You've been listening to Bold(h)er, brought to you by BMO for Women. Our guest today was Leah Lizarondo, CEO and founder of Food Rescue Hero. I'm Lisa Bragg. If you liked the show, please share it with others so they can hear stories of, and for women who stand out. You can also subscribe and please review. Thank you to our production team at MediaFace. Thanks for listening.