



Company makes use of banquets' leftovers

Special E is hired to rescue food, flowers, and excess supplies after special event to recycle and distribute to people in need.

By Kristen Kridel | Chicago Tribune Reporter

Behind the bustling crowd, shimmering lights and the towering calla lilies of a Fortune 500 company event, a team dispatched on a late-night rescue mission rode silently up a freight elevator at Chicago's Field Museum.



Armed with lightweight equipment, four men and women dressed in black slipped into the caterer's staging area to take down their designated target: leftovers.

Delicacies that surpassed the appetites of some 3,800 partygoers—garlic butter shrimp, chicken kebabs and roasted squash was tucked into 150 disposable trays and transported to the needy. "It's never ending," said Christine Bellavia of the estimated 3,000 pounds of food her "Rescue Squad" recovered. "Otherwise, it would just go in the garbage."

Bellavia is a contract employee for Special E, a for-profit business hired to rescue reusable leftovers after special events such as wedding receptions and corporate banquets. The remains of lavish spreads are packed up and transported to local shelters, charitable organizations, hospitals, nursing homes, and recycling facilities.

And food isn't the only remnant that's salvaged. The rescue squad takes anything from centerpieces and floral arrangements to leftover giveaways and promotional items.

The company has recovered leftovers from more than 100 events nationwide—about half a dozen of which have been right here in the Chicago area. Individuals or companies hosting events, such as a national conference that was held at the Field Museum, pay a fee based on the number of guests attending the event and the types of items saved.

Started about a year ago, Special E has turned a novel, eco-friendly idea into a business poised to transform an industry marked by waste and excess, experts said. The firm is based in New Jersey and has rescue squads in 30 metro areas throughout North America.

"We have a network of recipients willing to accept most any type of leftovers in every major market in the country," said Robert Kalt, the company's founder. Kalt used to be an event planner at one of the world's leading healthcare companies, Johnson & Johnson.

Unserved food is taken to homeless shelters and food banks, floral arrangements to hospitals and nursing homes, hotel room amenities to families that have lost their belongings in a fire or flood, and bridesmaid dresses to underprivileged teenage girls. (continued)

“Surplus promotional products, trade show giveaways, misc. event supplies and candles go to the American Red Cross and other organizations that help the victims of natural disasters,” Kalt said. Food scraps from buffets can be turned into compost.

Beverage containers, brochures, catalogs and misc. meeting handouts can be recycled. Special E even takes bottle caps, wine bottle corks, leftover decorations, balloons and the like to artisans who use odds and ends in their work. “There are so many opportunities. It's just endless,” Kalt said. “It's like a monster that keeps growing and growing.”

The charge for the service typically ranges from \$1 to \$2 a guest. Kalt said he feels no guilt about making money off others' goodwill. “We're trying to provide a resource to help people and companies do something positive with the excess that would otherwise be thrown out,” he said. “We don't lose sleep at all because we're helping both our planet and people in need!”

One banquet and bar mitzvah at a time, Special E is taking the trend of going green with special events to the next level, local caterers and green lifestyle expert Sara Snow agree. “With organic food and recycled paper, it's easy to think about earth friendly tactics on the front end of event planning,” said Snow, who has hosted two Discovery Network shows on living green. “The part that's often forgotten is the excess at the end.”

Snow said she wasn't aware of any other companies providing a similar service, only non-profits. And even those attempts, such as Habitat for Humanity collecting used home goods, focus on specific items. “I've never heard of a for-profit company that will find all these different uses for [leftovers],” she said. “This is very exciting to me.”

In addition to environmental and humanitarian satisfaction, there are also financial benefits from using this service. “Companies and individuals who donate purchased items to charitable organizations usually can get tax deductions if they get a receipt for the donation and have proof of its value,” said Chris Beaulieu, a Schaumburg tax partner with Clifton Gunderson CPA firm.

“By using our service, companies also end up benefiting from the positive publicity that comes from demonstrating their commitment to being good corporate citizens,” Kalt said.

“The leftovers Special E picks up are far preferred to collection by local food banks because its rescue workers will show up day or night,” said Susan Jaffe, associate vice president of Food for Thought, a caterer in Chicago.

“The fact that they pick it up right then and there is a big plus,” Jaffe said. “It's been a long night. Often the easiest thing to do is simply throw it all away.”

Because the Greater Chicago Food Depository can't salvage food from smaller functions and only makes rescues during regular business hours, a spokesman said he doesn't see Special E as competition, but rather as an ally in their efforts to feed people that are hungry and homeless.

The Pacific Garden Mission, a homeless shelter, received the bountiful remains from the event at the Field Museum. Residents said the refried bean burritos and kidney beans that are typically served at the mission made the donation seem like a feast. “We don't get food like this,” said Rickey Culver, who lives at the mission “Meat that big—never!”

If you have an event coming up and would like Special E to rescue what's left, you can get more information on the unique service they provide by visiting them online at www.thespeciale.com.