**Denton Chamber of Commerce speech**

Thank you very much for your kind words, President Smatresk (SMAH-tresk). I’m very happy to be here with you today, and not just because of the delicious meal. (LAUGH) I’m here today on behalf of Backyard Farms, (SLIDE 1) a local family farm that provides fresh, organic produce to Denton, Prosper and Frisco. Today, I’m going to talk to you about one of my favorite things— food.

I’m about to make a big understatement, so get ready. Food is an important part of life. (PAUSE) Of course, you’re all thinking, “Duh.” (LAUGH) But there’s more to food than just taste and nutritional value. Eating isn’t just something we do to survive, it’s a shared human experience. I mean, take today’s event for example. We didn’t just come to meet; we all came to eat! Meals are connections.

If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to tell you a story about my mother. When I was young, my mom and I had a tumultuous relationship. You know how it is when you’re a teenager, you want to do all sorts of things that upset your parents, and they get mad at you for no reason. Now, my mother is a proud woman, and she absolutely hates to apologize. When we’d get into a fight, I’d storm off to my room and she’d watch me go. But I always knew things were better when she’d come to find me and offer me a snack or some fruit. She’d use food to communicate her feelings. (PAUSE FOR EFFECT) She still does. When my mom is happy, she cooks. When she’s sad, she cooks. When there’s an event, you’d better believe she cooks. Does anyone else know someone like that? (RAISE HAND)

Food is an essential part of life. However, a large portion of the population does not have stable access to food. (SLIDE 2) According to Serve Denton, the largest nonprofit center in Denton County, 15% of our county’s population suffers from food insecurity. (PAUSE FOR EFFECT) That’s more than 125-thousand people who have limited access to food.

A lack of access to food affects every area of life. How can you think about anything else when you’re worrying if you’re going to be able to put food on the table for you and your family? (PONDER) Food insecurity can also cause health problems for many reasons. When you aren’t sure if you’ll be able to afford another meal, you’ll reach for cheaper options, which are usually highly processed and bad for your health. According to Feeding America, an organization dedicated to putting an end to food insecurity, nearly 80% of the food-insecure households it serves purchase inexpensive, unhealthy food to stretch their budget.

Additionally, households that experience food insecurity are often forced to choose between food and other necessities. (SLIDE 3) The graphic on the screen is from Feeding America, and it shows the decisions that many food-insecure households face. They have to decide whether they want to eat or seek medical care. (PAUSE FOR EFFECT) Whether they should have dinner or have running water this month.

So, when we’re talking about food insecurity, it’s clear that this is a serious problem that affects our community. But, what can WE do? It may feel like this problem is too big for anybody to address on their own. However, there are many steps that we can take to improve the lives of those facing this reality. One way that my organization, Backyard Farms, helps those in need is by making monthly donations to Denton’s Our Daily Bread soup kitchen.

Now, I could go into detail and tell you all about soup kitchens and how they’ve existed from as far back as ancient Egypt, but you probably don’t really care about that. You’re all smart people, and I promise you that even my charming and vivacious personality couldn’t make the information entertaining. (LAUGH) Instead, I’d like to tell you exactly how the soup kitchen helps our community.

I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Jane Doe. (SLIDE 4) Jane is a mother, a wife, a teacher and an excellent pianist. Jane is also someone who has faced food insecurity in her life. In 2008, Jane was living on her own. She had just graduated from college, and she was excited to start a job in her field: broadcast journalism. She wanted to be the next Walter Cronkite. However, before that could happen, the recession hit. Suddenly, no one was hiring. Jane had worked as a server throughout college, but the restaurant she worked at couldn’t afford her to hire her full time. She was left in debt without a full-time job, and no one was able to hire her.

This was a very scary moment for Jane, to put it lightly. (PASSIONATELY) She had done everything right! She had gone to school, gotten the grades, worked through college, and still, the world had turned its back on her. (PAUSE) Through no fault of her own, she was unable to fend for herself.

Jane was living paycheck to paycheck. She would stretch money for weeks, trying to afford everything she needed. Food, gas, rent, utilities and more, it all began to pile up. Jane felt humiliated. Even though it wasn’t her fault, she was scared that people would judge her for the situation she was in. (PAUSE)

However, the turning point came when she looked at her budget and realized she couldn’t afford to purchase groceries and pay her water bill. She had been hunting for jobs, but none had replied. She knew she needed help.

Jane said that reaching out to a soup kitchen was one of the hardest things that she’s ever had to do. However, the volunteers treated her with kindness and compassion. The help they provided allowed Jane a chance to take a breath. With the comfort of knowing she had at least one meal per day covered, she was able to take a step back and decide her next move. Eventually, she decided to go back to school and studied to become a teacher. Now, 12 years later, Jane lives happily with her family. She says that getting help from the soup kitchen was really the turning point that helped her get back on her feet. (PAUSE)

Now, you may be thinking, “That’s a rare case. I mean, it’s one thing to suffer during a recession, but the past is the past and things are better now!”

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that this isn’t just a one-time situation. The economic instability caused by the pandemic and the shutdowns that followed left many furloughed or unemployed. Many minimum wage jobs reduced hours, leaving those who make the least money with even less income. In the first two weeks of the shutdowns, Feeding America’s food banks reported a 30 to 60% increase in the number of visitors. (PAUSE) This shows that there was an increased need for assistance with food as people grappled with their new realities. Thankfully, the United States economy is continuing to recover. However, this pandemic has shown the importance of organization that help us as a community when we are unable to help ourselves.

So, now that you know about the importance of soup kitchens, what can we do to help? (SLIDE 5) Well, there are lots of ways that we can get involved and help uplift our community. One of the easiest ways to get involved is through donations. This could be a donation of either goods or money. Each month, Backyard Farms donates 10 free boxes of our produce to Denton’s Our Daily Bread soup kitchen so that it can provide hot meals for those in need. However, man cannot live on vegetables alone. (LAUGH) Soup kitchens also need dairy products, proteins and other foods that are necessary for a nutritious diet.

Maybe you don’t have food or other goods to donate, but you still want to get involved. One easy way to do that is by donating money. Now I know what you’re thinking, “Isn’t donating money just a cop-out?” The answer is a resounding NO! This money is going to be used to buy goods that the organization needs most. It will be put to use directly helping the most vulnerable people in our community.

One more resource that you can donate is time. Volunteers are critical to soup kitchens. These organizations are often run as or affiliated with nonprofits, and they need people who are willing to spend their free time helping those in need. Volunteering at a soup kitchen is a wonderful way to give back to the community, and the organizations aren’t able to operate at their full potential without them.

Lastly, an easy way to help soup kitchens is by raising awareness. Many people in our community may have food that they don’t need, but they may not know about the soup kitchen. Even if they do know, they might not consider the organization when they’re cleaning their pantry. Partnering with or even just shouting out a soup kitchen can be a great way to remind people that the organization is accepting donations. It also reminds the community that the resource is there if they need it. By doing this you not only make the process of going to a soup kitchen seem less scary, but you may also provide the organization with donations they wouldn’t have received before.

Overall, soup kitchens are an awesome way to directly help the public. By coming together, we can help fight food insecurity in our community. Investing in our friends and neighbors will allow us to succeed together. As Helen Keller once said, “Alone, we can do so little. Together, we can do so much.” Thank you for your time. (EXIT STAGE)