

## Company profits on banquets' table scraps and leftovers

**The Special E is hired to collect food, flowers, candy wrappers, etc., after special events to give to the needy or recycle**

By [Kristen Kridel](#)  
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Close to the shimmering disco balls, throbbing drums and the towering calla lilies of a Fortune 500 company extravaganza, a team dispatched on a late-night rescue mission rode silently up a freight elevator at the 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 among them—were tightly 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 The Special E, a for-profit business hired to collect reusable leftovers after special events such as wedding receptions and corporate banquets. The remains of lavish spreads are transported to local charitable organizations, recycled or taken to compost centers.

And foods aren't the only remnants salvaged. The scavengers take anything from floral centerpieces to candy wrappers.

The company has recovered leftovers from more than 100 events nationwide—about half a dozen in the Chicago area. Individuals or companies hosting events, such as Ameriprise Financial's national conference at the Field Museum, pay a fee based on the number of guests and the types of items saved.

Started about a year ago, The 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 East Brunswick, N.J.

In every major metropolitan area in the country, the company has a network of recipients willing to accept most any salvageable scrap, said Robert Kalt, the company's founder,

who used be an event planner.

Unserved food is taken to shelters and food banks, centerpieces to hospitals and nursing homes, hotel room toiletries to the needy and bridesmaids dresses to underprivileged girls.

Surplus promotional products, trade show giveaways, samples 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 and extra brochures, catalogs and handouts can be recycled. The Special E even takes bottle caps, wine corks, candy wrappers, 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, who has earned about \$250,000 in revenue in the last year, 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 waste that would be thrown out,” he said. “We don’t lose sleep at all because if we didn’t do it, no one would do it.”

One banquet and bar mitzvah at a time, The Special E is taking the trend of going green with special events to the next level, local caterers and Indianapolis 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. “It’s very exciting for me.”

In addition to environmental and humanitarian satisfaction, clients of The Special E in theory should be able to receive financial benefits too.

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.

Probably more important to companies are the marketing and publicity benefits, Kalt

said.

There are, however, stumbling blocks for the green company. Without offices around the country, pickups are made by local workers hired for each event.

During the rescue at the Field this month, Bellavia's team transferred some of the food to disposable tins amid flies in a docking area. Other perishables sat in an un-refrigerated van for at least three hours.

Kalt called the Field event an "extreme situation" and said rescue squads usually have the food wrapped up in a kitchen with coolers available if necessary.

Despite the occasional mishap, The Special E pickups 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 throw it 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 The Special E as competition.

The Pacific Garden Mission, a homeless shelter, received the bountiful remains of the Ameriprise Financial event. There was no indication the difficulties on the loading dock caused any problems.

Residents said the refried bean burritos with a side of kidney beans regularly served at the mission made the donation seem like a feast.

"We don't get it like this every day," said Rickey Culver, who has lived at the mission for almost a year. "We've never had stuff like that. Meat that big—no!"

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