

pulse

The best Chicago entertainment & culture

BY MARY HOULIHAN

All over the city, neighborhood food pantries serve those in need. But only one — the Common Pantry — has made it a mission to let their clients speak.

Common Pantry's mission is saluted in the new book "I Am Your Neighbor: Voices from a Chicago Food Pantry."

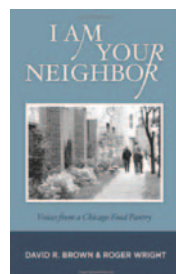
A compilation of 21 oral histories that would make Studs Terkel proud, the book is a way to bridge what organizers felt was a gap of misunderstanding between the folks who frequent the pantry and those who live in the neighborhood around 8744 N. Damen, where the pantry is located.

About four years ago, an increase in those using the pantry had co-author David Brown, a longtime volunteer and vice president of its board of directors, looking for a way to pacify residents who had voiced complaints about having the pantry so close to their homes. After meetings with the alderman and neighbors, many new policies were put into effect at the pantry, but Brown felt there also was a way to enlighten through words.

"People didn't understand our mission," he said. "There was a fear of the unknown. By telling these stories, we hoped to increase awareness of why we are here."

Co-author Roger Wright, who met Brown through Epiphany United Church of Christ, which houses Common Pantry, is a longtime fan of Terkel's work and felt a book of oral histories also could be a good fund-raising tool for the nonprofit.

"None of these people have ever been asked to tell their story before," said Wright, a former ghostwriter for Gallup Publishing and author of the blog Chicago Guy. "And a story is something they all have."



The book was never meant to be a collection of sad stories or a complete documentation of a life, but rather a selection of personal stories told by struggling people in their own words.

"No one ever wants to hear about me. Not in any kind of objective sense, where there's no judgment, no advice, no warnings," says Cheryl, one of the clients interviewed in the book. "Talking like this? When I can just talk? This makes me think that I really am somebody."

Several of the stories share

various eyewitness accounts of Chicago history — Prohibition, politics, race and crime. There are memories of growing up in the Lathrop Homes housing projects and exploits at Riverview Amusement Park, as well as time spent in reform school or building the John Hancock Tower. One man tells of hitchhiking across the country at the age of 13; another of how he is disappointed in himself.

Another man, Carl, moved to Hollywood in the late '70s with hopes of becoming an actor. To support himself, he finds a job selling Persian rugs and meets the rich and famous. He tells of one

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DAVID BROWN, author

hilarious encounter: "I get on all fours with Barbra [Streisand], and we crawl under the piano, we pull the rugs out while the guy lifts this piano. Face to face, inches apart, we're on all fours; I'm looking into her nostrils. The most famous nose in the world, I guess, after,

what, Jimmy Durante?"

Mary Osman, whose children at Rogers Park Montessori School pack lunches and deliver them to the pantry once a month, feels "I Am Your Neighbor" is the perfect choice for her book club.

"We go and we serve but to really understand what these people have gone through is another matter," Osman said. "The purpose of a book club is to get people talking, and if you can have a more substantive discussion, you'll come away feeling better about the time you spent on the book."

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ON A MISSION

Common Pantry supporters David Brown (left) and Roger Wright hope raise awareness with "I Am Your Neighbor." | AL PODGORSKI-SUN-TIMES



FEEDING SOULS

Common Pantry longtime volunteers give voice to the city's hungry



The authors of "I Am Your Neighbor" met through the Epiphany United Church of Christ. | AL PODGORSKI-SUN-TIMES

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PANTRY

Brown has heard from book clubs nationwide that plan to read the book. He and Wright are working on a book guide that will encourage readers to get involved in their community.

"Out of all this has grown a great sense of community," Brown said. "At first, neighbors felt the pantry's clients were coming in from other

parts of the city. But by recounting these personal stories, they've come to realize these people live in the neighborhood and simply need some help to get by."

"I Am Your Neighbor" is available on Amazon and neighborhood bookstores. All proceeds directly benefit the Common Pantry. For more information, go to commonpantry.org.

Mary Houlihan is a locally based free-lance writer.