



Newsday

# Llife

Kevin O'Shea, right, delivers food to Bruce Berger.

# Helping neighbors

NORTH FORK NONPROFIT GROWS TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS **E4**

NEWSDAY / JOHN PANKSEVANS





# SUPPORT THAT MEANS SOLUTIONS

## Nonprofit CAST's services lift up a community

BY MARGARET SHAKESPEARE  
Special to Newsday

Six years ago, single mom Tess Wonderling fled a “pretty bad [domestic] situation” in Florida with her 8-year-old son to begin a new life in Southold Town, on Long Island’s East End.

“We came with literally only whatever we could fit in our car,” she said. She had a temporary place to stay, with her sister, but needed food, clothing and guidance sorting out the requirements and applications for New York State assistance.

Gladys, a native of Guatemala, had worked steadily for years on the North Fork at low-wage jobs, like housecleaning and waitressing, that were forgiving of her limited English-language abilities. But she and her partner wanted their 2-year-old daughter to have a solid jump-start in literacy and social skills to gain readiness and confidence for preschool.

Bruce Berger, retired but juggling part-time work with primary caregiver responsibilities for his wife, who is disabled and homebound, needed immediate help paying home heating-oil bills one cold winter.

These North Forkers, among

many others with urgent needs — nutritious food, clothing, navigation of government services (and the seemingly endless required paperwork) — have found welcoming smiles and practical solutions at

CAST, a hands-on nonprofit community-based organization for the past 56 years. Its founding mission — to provide a safety net and promote self-sufficiency for North Fork residents in need — has not changed over the decades. Its brand has been refreshed only recently to better reflect the roster of services under its umbrella: CAST, originally an acronym for Community Action Southold Town, now stands for Center for Advocacy, Support, Transformation.

But perhaps most important of all, its visibility, outreach and program capabilities have taken a mighty leap forward with a fall 2021 move into its first-ever permanent home — a spacious community center with dedicated areas for large-group gatherings, classes, workshops and seminars; computer stations; a large food pantry; separate farm-fresh produce room; a working kitchen; and more. (CAST still distributes essentials one morning a week at Holy Trinity Church in Greenport.)

Under the leadership of executive director Cathy A. Demeroto, CAST was able to leave behind a trail of cramped make-do rentals and on-loan facilities with the purchase of a handsome 1.15-acre property, originally Southold Methodist Church and most recently an opera house, in the center of Southold Village. The nonprofit paid just under \$3 million for a 9,000-square-foot, two-story main building, includ-

ing the former sanctuary, plus a 2,200-square-foot former parsonage with grounds for play areas and a learning garden. Through the generosity of local donors and others, CAST aims to retire the mortgage by the end of 2022.

Demeroto, for whom Southold Town had been a longtime family vacation destination, accepted the position — and challenges — at CAST in 2017, after years of nonprofit experience elsewhere.

By the time she arrived, “we were known as a trusted resource in the community, although with no marketing and limited outreach many thought of us mostly as a food pantry,” Demeroto said. “But actually we [had become] the only one-stop shop on the North Fork, with a holistic approach and breadth of services.”

### VOLUNTEERS AND PARTNERS

CAST relies on about a hundred volunteers of all ages and skills for help with programs, office and yard work,

**See COVER STORY on E6** bagging groceries, organizing donated goods and more.

Still, right off she could see “unmet needs and a potential to grow the organization.” And that CAST clients, many of whom work in agriculture or hospitality, “are the machine behind the local economy.”

The retired Rev. Ben Burns, a CAST founder and supporter, and his fellow clergy saw similar plight among their neighbors back in the 1960s. “We had poor people,” said Burns (coincidentally once a Methodist pastor at the very property that is now CAST’s home). He also knew to apply for federal grant money, un-



leased by President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty," for local programs.

Since those early days, federal, state and local grants as well as contributions by local businesses and individuals have been sources of funding and in-kind goods and services that have kept food in the pantry, programs running, and allowed, at times, for the modest expansion of services and paid staff.

"The annual budget was under \$150,000 not that long ago," recalled longtime CAST board member Denis Noncarow, a Southold Town government liaison officer. It grew to \$377,000 five years ago and around \$800,000 in 2021 (largely because of the property purchase). Sixty-five percent of the budget goes toward program expenses. "But the more you help, the more you find [in need of help]," he said. While local churches do outreach or run food pantries, none has capacity to "address a diversity of needs. CAST is there for all the challenges of life, to keep people going day-to-day."

Demeroto and her staff (six full time, eight part time) look for all kinds of partnering opportunities. When Gladys and other parents asked for support to enrich the lives and learning of their toddlers, CAST could connect them with ParentChild+. The national literacy program for school preparedness sends local early-learning specialists into low-income homes, armed with books and toys, to work one-on-one to engage parent and child in reading, counting, coloring — the building blocks of educational development.

"Now my daughter is so good at those things," Gladys said. "They always left the book and other things behind for her. And sometimes food, too! It was a big help."

"That program has opened a lot of doors," Demeroto said of sometimes finding more needs within a home that CAST can help address. Southold is

"rural, isolated; public transportation is poor. People can't always get to us, but with ParentChild+ we go to them."

Goods and services are free to CAST clients, all of whom must complete an intake process. CAST never gives money directly to clients, but it may, through a separate application, once a year per client, help with an emergency car repair or to get a rent, utility or other essential bill paid. When Bruce Berger couldn't make that heating-oil payment, CAST stepped in to pay the vendor directly, the usual procedure.

Now, since his wife depends on his caregiving most of the time, Berger gets twice-monthly grocery deliveries from CAST. "Whether it's the receptionist or deliverers," Berger said, "they are all so friendly and helpful. And like part of my family."

### UNPRECEDENTED NEED

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, closing schools, restaurants and workplaces, CAST cranked into high gear, filling crucial gaps. "The need [for food] was unprecedented," Demeroto said. "We distributed 4,500 meals on average monthly, a total of almost 200,000 meals in 2020 [up from 40,000 in 2019] partnering with local restaurants to get the food prepped."

During any school closure, CAST provides breakfast and lunch through Feed-a-Kid for children eligible for school meal programs.

"How generous this community is was the bright light of COVID," Demeroto added. "Some supporters would just call and say 'what do you need?'"

CAST also had fortuitously timed the rollout of a mobile food pantry for twice-monthly home deliveries, starting in 2020, allowing many clients to rely on the new service. Between the mobile pantry and the new CAST center, clients have a few choices. Quite a few. Clients can make individual selections from the food

pantry and the Charles and Helen Reichert Family Foundation Fresh Bounty Pantry.

Ten local farms contribute pantry produce (since 2018, farmers donating to food pantries have been eligible for a New York State tax credit). Engage, Educate & Empower workshops, held one to three times a month, often focus on nutrition, canning and preserving, or other practical food preparation, among varied life skills. Recently Dime Bank hosted a financial literacy workshop for high school students; other financial workshops are geared to adults.

And a few weeks ago, education and outreach coordinator Erica Steindl and chef David Menjivar, a CAST volunteer and the pastor at MQV Church in East Marion who owns Amazing Flavors, an ice cream and coffee shop in Greenport, led a Pizza, Fruits and Veggies Workshop for families.

Many of the dozen or so who gathered around the large kitchen island, each with a cutting board and chef's knife, also attend CAST's English-as-a-second-language classes. They heard about how to make pizza a healthy meal (load up toppings with chopped peppers, broccoli and other veggies), then went down to the

### See COVER STORY on E8

Fresh Bounty Pantry to choose ingredients for personal pizzas. Menjivar demonstrated knife safety and off they went — chopping, discussing favorite flavor combinations and coaching one another in vocabulary. "Mush-room." "Blan-co." "Yell-ow."

The gleaming-white multipurpose kitchen, with a pass-through to the Empowerment Hall — a soaring space glitzed up with chandeliers and sconces, ballroom for the former opera-house tenants — will soon host a group of teens. These kids, who are not college-bound, have been recommended by local high school guidance counselors to enroll in the North Fork Culinary Program, 10 weeks of after-school classes that aim to prepare attendees to take the exam for Suffolk County Food Manager certification,

sought after because at least one employee in every Suffolk County food-service establishment must have one.

The program also prepares students to pursue other certificates and degrees in culinary arts and hospitality at Suffolk County Community College.

### 'GAME CHANGERS'

Back when she was picking up the pieces of her life as a new arrival on the North Fork, Tess Wonderling put pride aside and made CAST her first stop. "They helped me get back on my feet," she recalled gratefully.

Wonderling entered the SCCC culinary program in 2018 and interned at a local restaurant. Later she had general manager positions at leading restaurants on Shelter Island. Then CAST called in 2019: Would the former CAST client like to help design and run CAST's new high school culinary program?

Wonderling said she jumped at the opportunity, though classes then met in ill-equipped church kitchens. No wonder she is excited about the new facility. "I teach a lot of kitchen safety and sanitation. We focus a lot on fine dining. But with the new space I would like to expand so they have more skills," she said.

All the new little things — Peter Treiber, owner Treiber Farms, an in-

kind donor to the fresh pantry since 2018, says he nearly cried on finding truck turnarounds so easy compared with making produce drop-offs at the former CAST location in Greenport — and big things add up to be "game changers," said Treiber.

The Gathering Hall bears the name of Peter and Irene Treiber and Family after a capital campaign pledge in May 2021. This former church sanctuary is used for large meetings, classes and workshops; in the future, a fledgling arts program will take the stage for performances. It can also be rented, for a nominal fee, by nonprofits and community groups.

Other naming possibilities remain — from the welcome alcove at \$20,000 to the entire campus at \$500,000.

Cathy Demeroto keeps a keen eye on those numbers, on the numbers that CAST has been able to help — 661 families, 1,865 individuals in 2020, about 10% of Southold Town's population — and on future challenges.

"Our clients are the invisible thread that holds the North Fork together," she said. "We are transforming lives and moving people forward which will benefit all in the community, and now we are able to build stronger community as we enter this next phase of our development."

### More information

To see upcoming events, access services, volunteer or become a donor, visit CAST, 53930 Main Rd., Southold, its website, [castnorthfork.org](http://castnorthfork.org), or call 631-477-1717.





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**Volunteer Biff Harney of Southold stocks the shelves of the CAST food pantry, where clients are able to choose the items they need.**



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**Karina Hayes, food pantry manager, puts frozen turkeys into bags as she prepares for the day's food deliveries, which have increased during the pandemic.**





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CAST education and outreach coordinator Erica Steindl, center, practices the alphabet with young children in Greenport as part of the group's ParentChild+ program.

CAST has established its home in the former Southold Methodist Church, which has also been an opera house.



**ON THE COVER.** Bruce Berger, left, receives one of his twice-monthly food deliveries from CAST driver Kevin O'Shea in Greenport.



RANDEE DADDONA





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**Driver Kevin O'Shea of Greenport, left, and volunteer Paul Geiger of Southold load the mobile pantry van with bags of food for one of CAST's twice-monthly home deliveries.**

**Students from Southold High School pack produce for mobile pantry delivery during the Community Service Volunteer Orientation as part of Volunteers in Partnership Program at CAST.**



RANDEE DADDONA





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**Treiber Farm's Irene Treiber and her husband, Peter — pictured with farmhand Vas Kozyreff, manager Jocelyn Craig and Peter Treiber Jr. — are in-kind donors to CAST.**





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**CAST office assistant Kerstan Pringle oversees the Sharing Room, where clients can find such items as clothing, shoes, household items, toys and children's books.**



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**"Our clients are the invisible thread that holds the North Fork together," says CAST executive director Cathy A. Demeroto, who helped the group secure its new headquarters in the former Southold Methodist Church.**



RANDEE DADDONA

**Students from Southold, Greenport and Mattituck high schools participate in a Financial Literacy Workshop presented by Dime Bank with analyst Gregory Vlahakis.**





**Tess Wonderling, once a client of CAST, now runs the organization's high school culinary program and says the new space will help her to expand students' skills.**