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THE CAUSE

The Giving Truck

Four unlikely friends—including Mike D from the Beastie Boys and TV chef Sam Talbot—have banded together to bring hot meals to New York's hard-hit Rockaway Beach after Hurricane Sandy. Six months later, their food program is only getting bigger.

By ALEX FRENCH



[Enlarge Image](#)

Photography by Dan Martensen

GOING THE DISTANCE | From left, Sam Talbot, Jon Rose, Robert McKinley and Mike Diamond in the Rockaways, New York

AFTER HURRICANE SANDY transformed New York City's Rockaway peninsula into a pile of rubble and debris last October, the coastal enclave experienced an outpouring of support from police, firefighters and private citizens looking to lend a hand.

Together they brought contractor bags and cleaning supplies, helped residents gut and renovate their homes and delivered bottles of water and food to nearby apartment buildings. But as the months since the superstorm continued to pass, that outpouring inevitably diminished—even as conditions in many corners of Rockaway remain unimproved.

One constant in the neighborhood is Rockaway Plate Lunch Truck, an old beat-up food truck that's been offering hot, free meals—up to 500 a day—to residents five days a week since Sandy.



Enlarge Image

Photography by Dan Martensen

WARMING TREND | From left: Talbot, Diamond and McKinley tending to grilled chicken.

On a frigid January day, the food truck's four founders buzz with activity: Former Top Chef contestant Sam Talbot, currently a chef, author and TV personality, grills chicken thighs; Robert McKinley, creator of Ruschmeyer's and Montauk's Surf Lodge, chops the piping hot meat; Jon Rose, founder of Waves for Water, a nonprofit that provides clean drinking water to impoverished communities, runs refills of rice, beans and chicken to the tables where Mike Diamond—

better known as Mike D of the Beastie Boys, and now an occasional curator and self-described "Brooklyn dad and wannabe surf bum"—ladles out food. A line of Rockaway residents forms, snaking down the block away from the butane-warmed buffet. "A lot of people here don't know where their next hot meal is coming from," says Diamond, who, along with the other Plate Lunch founders, has already given away more than 20,000 free meals. "We see the same people every day," McKinley adds, pointing out a woman carrying a plastic bag for takeout. "They've come to count on it."

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and rice—the meal is filling and healthy.

Plate Lunch will give food away for free until the summer, when the truck will become a key player in a plan to teach Rockaway kids business and nutrition skills. They have plans to open a community garden—maintained by local school children—where the vegetables grown will be sold at a farm stand, also to be staffed by locals. All of the proceeds will go back into the garden.

McKinley and Diamond, two old Montauk surfing pals, arrived at the idea for Plate Lunch after driving out to volunteer the weekend after Sandy. While there was no shortage of supplies or personnel, they identified a desperate need for hot food. So Talbot, another friend and surfing aficionado, who'd been the executive chef at the Surf Lodge, came with trays of provisions, feeding both the newly homeless as well as responders. A week later, he was standing on the corner of 45th and Beach Channel Drive, cooking food on a massive grill. McKinley pushed the idea one step further, renting an old [Swiss Chalet](#) truck from a man in Tennessee. Just 11 days after the storm, the ad hoc program was fully operational.

Since then, the Plate Lunch team has raised over \$200,000 to pay for food and the services of two full-time employees to run operations. And while they serve the same thing every day—marinated chicken with black beans, veggies



Enlarge Image

Photography by Dan Martensen

Mike Diamond

On that January afternoon, with the temperature hovering around 20 degrees, summer seems years away. The reggae tune "Dreadlock Holiday" blasts out of a nearby speaker, warming the afternoon air. Diamond dances in place as he fills up containers with piping hot chicken thighs. "The best thing about this is that it lifts people's mood," Diamond says. "At times like these, a little bit of hope, a little bit of happiness, it goes a long way."

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