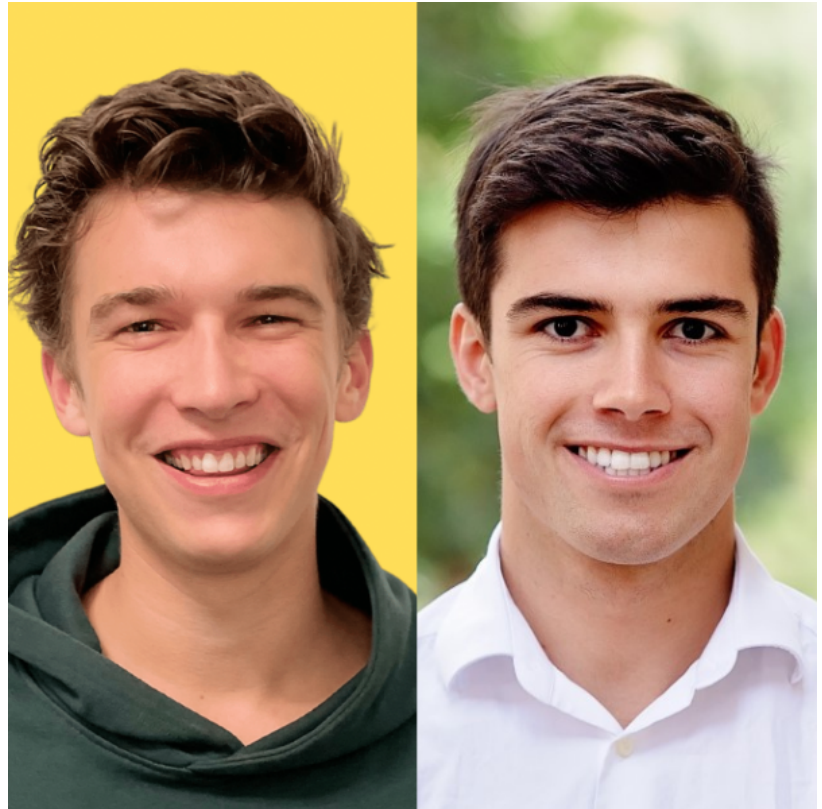


URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/the-birth-of-farmlink/>

James Kanoff, co-founder and board director of the Farmlink Project, tells the story of how the nonprofit started with a few college students and the dream of reducing food waste during the pandemic. He shares the struggles behind the scenes and how the Farmlink founders decided to build their team and their business.



Transcript

- I remember thinking and like I talked about it, 00:00:04,002 I was like, "I don't even know if I wanna share this 'cause it sounds so naive and even misplaced." But I really thought that the pandemic was gonna bring people together, I thought that the partisanship, the divide, the hate, that that was gonna go away and people were gonna come together to help each other because that's what I had seen time and time and again in a crisis.. And instead as we were like watching the world through our phone screen, it looked like we were seeing the opposite.. The mass, the no mass, the debate, food supplies, hoarding, dwindling.. It really felt like this, like crisis was unfolding and it didn't seem like there was a lot that we could do about it.. In addition to the health crisis that was unfolding.. To make matters worse, there was also an economic one.. First millions of families were forced to flood a charitable food system that was never really designed for a crisis.. And at the same time that that was happening, farmers were being forced to throw away millions and millions of pounds of food every single day as a result of closures to schools, hotels, and restaurants.. Pictured here is a line at the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank.. I know it's a really grainy image, which almost even adds to the eeriness of it..

The line stretched for seven miles and blocked the freeway.. Nearly all the families were turned away that day.. Pictured here is a pile of onions where a farmer had to dig a ditch to bury millions of them because they had nowhere to go.. And I think in seeing both of these problems sort of side by side at some point, and it was probably just frustration and a little bit of naiveness, we said we're gonna do something about it.. Well said, "We'll connect one farm to one food bank." We started calling hundreds of farmers, like hundreds of them and to our surprise, I don't know if it was maybe that the 30 or 40th we keep getting hung up on, but none of them had surplus.. - I mean we had this list of hundreds of farmers 00:01:44,190 that we'd put together and we were just calling them one by one and it was, didn't pick up, didn't have surplus, didn't want to talk to college kids.. - Yeah, call back and I'll call the police.. 00:01:54,030 It was not going well and maybe we're like days into this and I think at this point we've stopped going to class and it's maybe the 200th farmer that we call.. In fact I think it was the 201st farmer that we called.. We picked up the phone and he says, "Hey, yeah I have 10,000 eggs, I don't know what to do with them..

If you can come pick 'em up, they're yours." We had no way to get this, but this was the exact item our local food bank was looking for, so we rented a U-Haul truck, we drove to the farm, we put those 10,000 eggs in the back and we literally like

bumbled down the 405 freeway.. Honestly not trying to tip over, like, I've never been honked at more times in my life than driving in this U-Haul.. - I'm at home thinking about Aiden 00:02:30,870 and James making omelets in the back of their truck.. And it was not the start of a 100 million pound nonprofit.. - No and we ended up delivering it 00:02:41,370 to the local food bank and maybe that's all FarmLink would have been but someone, I think it was Stella actually, one of our other co-founders, she started painting this bedsheet and she wrote the words FarmLink on it and we had this idea, well just, why don't we just strap that onto the U-Haul truck? And we took this photo and the photo sort of became this like visual symbol, we didn't need words to describe it, it was like, "Oh, this is something to do with people coming together." We posted it online and pretty soon friends and then friends of friends were reaching out saying, how could I help? Eventually strangers were even reaching out saying, "Hey, I have a pickup truck, I'll go 10 hours anywhere, just tell me where to go.. Pretty soon we'd moved more food and the news started covering this phenomena.. We'd put up this clunky little website and like to our surprise, one day we wake up and we have thousands of donations from all across the country, I mean five and \$10 donations, but at this point it's like hundreds of thousands of dollars in our friend's bank account.. And that's the public side of the story.. But this is ETL, so we're gonna take you behind the scenes here for a second because behind the scenes, if you're listening to anything I'm saying, this solution does not make a lot of sense.. - No..

00:03:52,680 that is not scalable, that is definitely dangerous.. It is borderline illegal.. - No, it's for sure illegal.. 00:03:56,982 It's not, we can't do that.. - That's for the next presentation.. 00:04:03,610 If it's not clear that this solution isn't exactly perfect, check this delivery that we tried to do of 40,000 pounds of potatoes, we put the pallets in the truck backwards, which meant when they got to the food bank, we could not get the pallets out, the pallet jack did not fit underneath, so what did we do, we got a big rope, we tied it around the boxes, hooked it to another semi-truck and tried to pull the pallets out, the box exploded, spilling thousands of pounds of potatoes onto the ground, which we then spent basically the next 10 hours picking up by hand.. I remember sitting in this pile of potatoes with my hand on my head and like honestly feeling like, "I'm gonna throw up." because you have all of these people who are counting on us and we have no idea what we're doing.. We don't know anything about agriculture.. We know even less about shipping and we sure as hell don't know anything about leadership, at this point, the largest thing that I've led is a high school football team to a two and eight season.. - I led an improv group in high school 00:05:01,067 and we didn't win anything, so..

(crowd laughing) - And that's the amazing thing about a crisis 00:05:07,051 is that you're way underqualified but it's better to do something than nothing in that situation.. And so at some point we said we just need to get going and we started to recruit a team.. We called friends and friends of friends and pretty soon we were making sub-teams.. The farms team would call farms to identify surplus.. The food bank team would call food banks to figure out which food was needed where.. And the deal team would do all the logistics.. So they'd actually schedule with professional truck drivers to connect the farm to the food bank.. - To be clear, we stopped driving U-Haul trucks, 00:05:37,200 we started working with professional truck drivers and we were the ones coordinating point A to point B.. - Which turns out is really, really hard to do.. 00:05:45,150 And we called it deal team six because that team was basically up 24 hours a day coordinating trucks 'cause shipping never stops, which is a lot to ask, again, for students..

Within a couple weeks, we were calling thousands of farmers a day, talking with hundreds of food banks and coordinating a bunch of deliveries and within a month, and we'd set like this goal, we were gonna say, "We're gonna move a million pounds of food in a year." We'd moved a million pounds of food in a month.. And I think we all started to realize that this was actually something much bigger and we really wanted to get to work...