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Helping the needy through rock 'n' roll

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While most of Justin Baker's classmates at the University of Colorado at Boulder spent their spring breaks in Cancun or South Padre Island, he spent his March vacations on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

As his peers imbibed yards of beer in sweaty nightclubs, he drank in Oglala Sioux culture in spiritual sweat lodges. As they dropped Ecstasy, he dropped food off to the Native Americans as an offering of kinship. And nearly 10 years later, Baker hasn't relented with his offerings of food - only now it's a more concerted effort.

Conscious Alliance, Baker's nonprofit organization, has collected more than 500,000 pounds of food for the needy since it was formed in 2002 - and he's collected the non-perishables through rock 'n' roll.

With the help of bands such as String Cheese Incident and Sound Tribe Sector 9, Conscious Alliance has conducted food drives using rock posters as an incentive and thank-you card. While Baker's dedication is impressive, his demographic is staggering.

"The most common compliment we get has always been about the different age ranges donating food at our drives as compared to the normal groups donating to food banks," said Baker, who has a goal of eventually collecting a million pounds of food per year - that's 500 tons - with the help of collegiate affiliates.

"It's what we might become most known for - getting younger people involved with fighting hunger and donating."

The business model is smart and simple: Those who brought a toy to last week's String Cheese Incident holiday benefit at the Boulder Theater got a limited-edition SCI poster. Anyone who donated 75 nonperishable food items at Phil Lesh's eight-night stand earlier this year at New York City's Beacon Theater received an eight-panel poster series by famed Grateful Dead artist Stanley Mouse. "We took out nearly half of the canned goods aisle at the grocery store across the street from the Beacon," recalled Baker, who always requests that donations be low-sodium, healthy products.

The holiday season is a busy one for Conscious Alliance, which has been built on a foundation of giving and fandom. Local boys Yonder Mountain String Band will host the organization during its three-night New Year's Eve stand at the Fillmore Auditorium. Conscious Alliance will also have a presence at Zilla's upcoming show at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall, the Disco Biscuits at Philadelphia's Tweeter Center, SCI at San Francisco's Concourse and Sound Tribe Sector 9 at Atlanta's Tabernacle - all in the next 10 days.

That's a lot of food. But those on the receiving end aren't the only ones touched by Conscious Alliance's efforts.

"It's amazing how one man's vision and commitment to help others has directly touched the lives of so many," said String Cheese Incident's Keith Moseley. "SCI has an incredible symbiotic relationship with Conscious Alliance. They provide the opportunity and infrastructure for our fans to help feed some of those in need, and our community has embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly; they've been so generous."

After Hurricane Katrina's devastation, the group saw an opportunity to alter its business approach. Three days after the storm hit, Baker flew to Houston and sent a letter via bands' mailing lists and his website, consciousalliance.org. He vowed to work amid the relief efforts so long as there was money in the organization's donation-funded PayPal account; within three days there was \$30,000. Three months later, more than \$75,000 had been donated.

"All of that went into buying food and produce for different free kitchens, most of which were right down in ground zero," Baker said. "That was when we first realized that we could ask for help in a different way. These bands all have huge email databases." While cash donations benefit any organization, Baker prefers donations of food, or in the holiday months, toys. They're tangible, he says, and require more thought and effort than simply pulling out your wallet. Listening to Baker talk about food, you're reminded of food's primary purpose of nourishment - something that is easily forgotten when food is a given rather than a question mark.

"Our goal is to bring a focus not only to hunger in the United States but also to the amount of poverty on the Indian reservations, places like Pine Ridge," Baker said of the reservation where his organization has opened an emergency food pantry. "Being a hunger awareness organization, we should tackle the hungriest places first."

It often follows that fans of socially progressive bands are often more giving themselves.

"A 2,000-person String Cheese crowd will donate as much food as a 20,000-person crowd at a Dave Matthews show," he said. "I see this one day being a pan-industry charity for the music industry, but we always hope to expand into the world of pro sports." Tapping NASCAR is even a possibility, he said.

"Our focus has never been to be a nonprofit existing in the music industry," Baker said. "Our focus is all about collecting food for Indian reservations and food banks. The music industry's just the beginning."

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