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Retired greyhound trainer Owen Marron is a volunteer for Waiwaste in Masterton.

PHOTOS: LUCY COOPER/WAIRARAPA TIMES-AGE

On the road with Waiwaste

Pickups, dropoffs all in a day's food rescue

RECYCLING Lucy Cooper

Owen Marron knows how to build rapport. A tall, strong-looking older man with a firm handshake and a broad smile, Marron was my Waiwaste guide, giving me a behind-the-scenes look at being a volunteer for the region's food rescue organisation.

By the time I turned up just after 8.30am on a drizzly Monday morning, he was finishing prepping one of Waiwaste's two electric vehicles to do the first pickups of the week of rescued produce from Pak'nSave, New World and Moore Wilsons.

While I was busy getting in the way, fellow volunteers Gary Saunders and Simon Ellis were also gearing up for their pickups at Woolworths.

With banana boxes and crates packed in the back of Marron's van and mileage logged, we were ready.

"You have to be careful," he said, putting the van into drive and slowly pulling away into Hope St. "These vans can go a bit."

By the end of the street we were yarning away like old mates.

Before becoming more or less a fulltime volunteer for Waiwaste and Masterton Food Bank, Marron told me his last job before retirement was as a security guard at the local Pak'nSave.

For 30 years before that he'd trained greyhounds for a living, with some success, and at one point had turned his hand to managing the TAB in Masterton.

"I'm a dog person," he said, and he liked having a flutter, in a disciplined manner.

Marron's Monday route started with picking up a trolley-load of bread from Pak'nSave, then it was up to New World for more bread and some fresh veges.

Our final stop was Moore Wilsons, for a box of fruit, vegetables and groceries.

At every stop, Marron had a wave, a big smile and a "thank you" for the store staff.

As he put it, he was a very "affable" person. "And why not?" he said.

Chatting about the qualities a person needed to be a good volunteer as we motored electrically from store to store, affability was right up there for Marron, along with being reasonable and reliable.

It was about building good relationships with people, he said, something he believed the current crop of food rescue volunteers had achieved.

"We've got a good crew at Waiwaste. We've built a lot of unity."

That unity – led by Waiwaste manager Vic Ross and operations manager Laura Garland – helped rescue and redistribute



The NZ Food Network prevents good food from going to landfill and redirects it to communities that need it most.

more than 150,000kg of food to hungry people in Wairarapa during the last financial year.

It was a significant amount of food, but the issue of food waste was a significant problem, as confirmed by a report issued by the Ministry of the Environment this week.

It put the total amount of food lost or wasted in New Zealand every year at 1.22 million tonnes – an estimated 5 to 10% of the nation's total annual food production – two-thirds of which was generated during the production and processing of food.

For Marron, who had volunteered with the charity for about six years, Waiwaste was "a highly-motivated organisation" with a "great concept, that's the bottom line".

Back at food rescue HQ, it was all hands on deck to unload the produce from the two vans, sort it and box it for collection later in the morning by some of the recipient agencies.

The team worked with practised efficiency on the stainless steel island in the middle of the Waiwaste building, diverting blemished fruit and veg to the compost and pig bins and checking produce use-by dates.

"We don't redistribute what we wouldn't eat ourselves," Ross said. "But nothing goes to landfill."

Within about 20 minutes, the stainless steel bench was wiped clean, several food boxes filled with fruit, vegetables and groceries were awaiting collection, and a pallet of potatoes had been delivered from the New Zealand Food Network.

A calm settled over the place, and someone suggested a cup of tea.

Marron reluctantly agreed to a photo, as long as it could be taken with his mate Stronach, then said a warm cheerio and took off on his bike into the muggy drizzle for his shift at Masterton Food Bank.

"We are really lucky with our volunteers," Ross said. "They are incredible, incredible people."