

# The food ladies

The vision of Toronto's Debbie Field and Mary Lou Morgan is to improve access to affordable nutritious food

BY MADELEINE GREEY  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Behind a quirky, bright orange door that has an array of kitchen utensils glued to its surface, work two Toronto women who care deeply about food and hunger.

The door's decor — pieced together from garage sales — speaks volumes about Debbie Field and Mary Lou Morgan.

Their mandate is to create community-based projects. Their vision is to improve access to affordable nutritious food. And this heavy, citrus-colored door with its collage of forks, knives and spoons, leads the way to a once-deserted warehouse on Eastern Ave. that is now rife with innovative food programs affecting more than 15,000 people a month.

Field is the executive director of FoodShare, an umbrella organization that oversees such programs as The Hunger Hotline, Community Gardens, Community Kitchens, Baby Nutrition and The Incubator Kitchen. But the flagship, perhaps, of FoodShare's web of programs is something called Field to Table, run by Mary Lou Morgan.

Technically, Field is "the boss" and Morgan "the employee." But in reality, the two work in a synergistic partnership that has pronounced yin and yang qualities.

Field, 45, is a fast, yet eloquent, talker. Words tumble out of her mouth barely keeping pace with her quick mind. Morgan, 53, is soft spoken. While thoughtfully produced, Morgan's sentences often trail off unfinished. She emits a gentle, warm and discerning quality that contrasts with Field's hot exuberance. Oil and water, they are not. In fact, Field and Morgan are a recipe for success.

"There's a dynamic tension between us," says Field. And that tension has helped to create, sustain and improve the Field to Table program, which started in 1994 delivering a Good Food Box to 40 families paying \$15 each. In three years, the program has grown exponentially.

Last April, 4,207 boxes were delivered and according to a recent evaluation, the program has succeeded on many levels. From a nutritional standpoint alone, the Good Food Box has made some remarkable inroads. Seventy per cent of the respondents said they now eat more vegetables, 21 per cent said they have more variety in their diet and another 20 per cent said that they enjoy a healthier diet because of the box.

It's a textbook version of the message Health Canada has been harping on to Canadians for years, but Field to Table's program is one of the few so-

John Fraser



Thank you, Karen Kain, thank you!

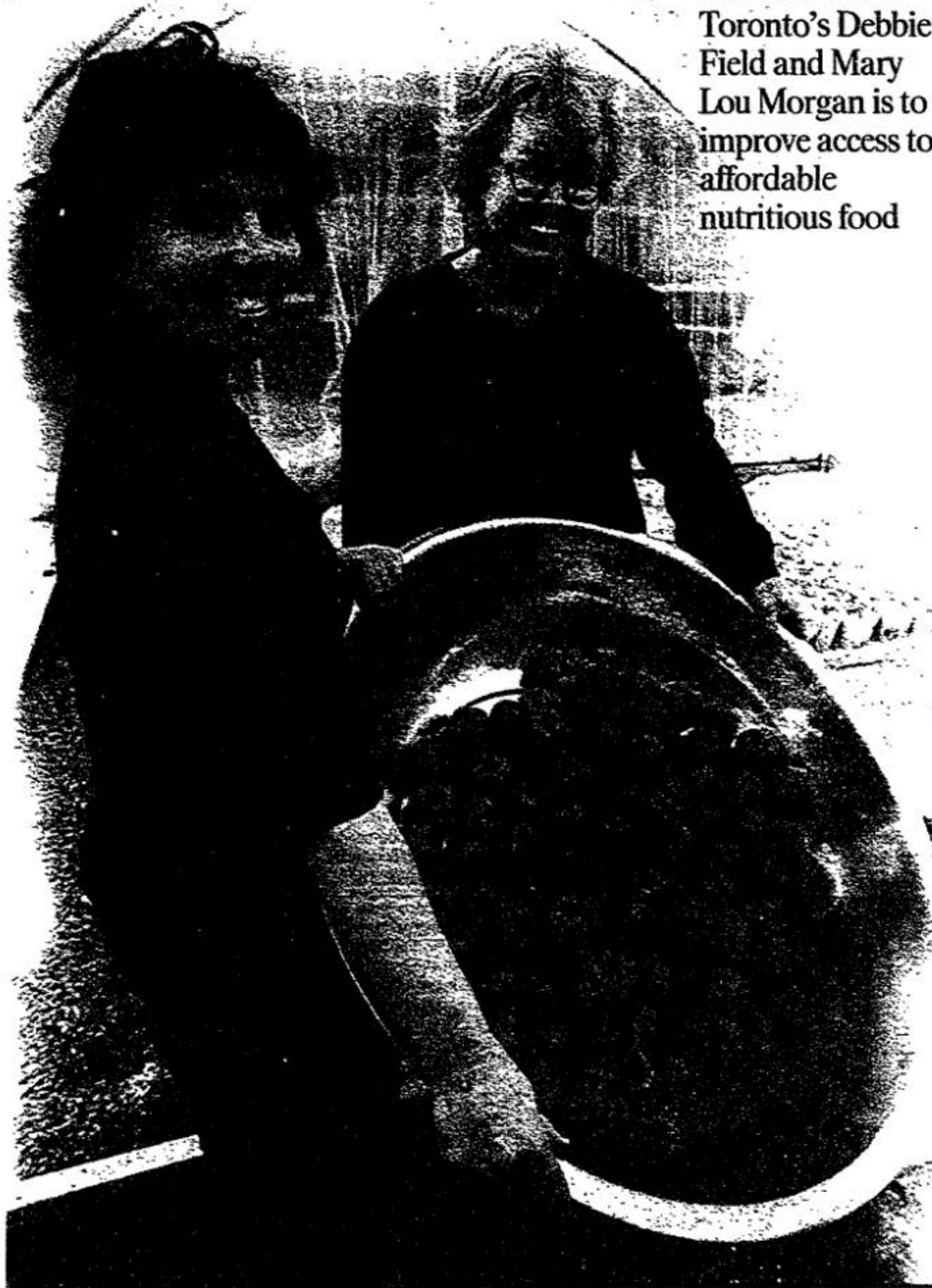
**K**AREN KAIN began her final dancing season last night at the Hummingbird Centre and I was there, as close to front and centre as I could get. This was an anticipatory presence, I should point out, because column writing for a color page at The Sunday Star requires a deadline earlier in the week.

Consequently, I am actually sitting at my desk in a bit of a daze because this brilliant, consummate artist — the best ballerina this country ever produced — has always been such a big part of our collective creative consciousness this past quarter century that I cannot bear the thought that she is about to hang up her pointe shoes. I was once one of her "critics" — if a gibbering fanatical worshipper could be called a critic. This was at the now-defunct Toronto Telegram from 1970 to 1972 and then at The Globe and Mail from 1972 to 1975 and these were the pivotal years Karen Kain rose to international stardom.

I also wrote a book about her, on her and the partner most identified with her, Frank Augustyn. They were "the gold-dust twins" of the National Ballet. Any international competition they entered, any production they starred in, any television special they were part of: it hardly mattered what — they turned it into gold.

I'm afraid I have always admired her so much that I could fill out the entire front page of the People section with gush like this and not feel one iota of embarrassment. Yet perhaps it might be useful to try and come to some sort of terms with the rationale for the gush, a gush shared with many people in many countries, but especially by an ever-loyal legion of fans in her home and native land. Certainly the major part of the reason was her magisterial technical prowess tied to her statuesque beauty.

I will go to my grave remembering the first impression of seeing her in *Swan Lake*. She just took my breath away. The technical skills, forged at the National Bal-



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

**RECIPE FOR SUCCESS:** The 'dynamic tension' between Debbie Field, left, and Mary Lou Morgan has helped to create, sustain and improve the Field to Table food program.

# Partners' dynamic tension their recipe for success

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cial agencies that can claim measurable success in this area.

The Good Food Box is doing many other important things. It is making high-quality, fresh fruits and vegetables available to a low-income population at an affordable price. This is not a food bank and there are no hand-outs. At present, Field to Table has seven different types of food boxes available ranging in prices from \$10-\$30. The boxes are distributed through a network of volunteer-run community drop-offs of 10 people or more. Not only does the program support Ontario farmers, it also helps build communities.

Both Field and Morgan have pinned a lot of their dreams to the Field to Table program. Morgan says they are trying to build a new, local food system that supports area farmers. Field talks of creating "a grassroots survivalist movement that will take over land and grow food."

They both speak passionately about breaking down isolation amid low-income populations and building strong, self-sufficient communities.

Many people, such as Metro Councillor Olivia Chow, believe that Field and Morgan have the capability to do all of this — and more.

"We women need to celebrate our female leaders more," enthuses Chow, an avid supporter of FoodShare. "Debbie Field is one of the most creative, community-minded persons around. She has a clear sense of direction... a vision. She believes that when people come together they can make a difference."

Field, in her own words, was born the child of immigrant "survivalists." Her Polish parents survived the Holocaust but her eldest sister, whom she never knew, didn't. Miraculously, her parents were reunited after the war.

Field grew up south of the border in a town called Peoria, near Chicago. Her father died when she was 3, and her mother supported Debbie and her sister, Miriam, both of whom were born after the war, by working minimum-wage jobs in department stores.

"I grew up in a very poor family," recalls Field. "But it was rich in so many other ways. What I learned from my mother is integral to what I do now. She taught me about the skills that immigrant women have around food management. Women use these skills to help their families survive and to enhance their quality of life."

Field came to Canada when she was 18 and "lucked out" because she went to Trent University at "the height of political upheaval." Her mentors were left-wing and feminist professors and thus, her politically active life was launched.

From September, 1979, to March, 1980, Field staged what she describes as "my most successful, straight-up, short campaign."

In her capacity as Canada's first Equal Opportunities Co-ordinator, working for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Field and four other women successfully lodged a Human Rights complaint against Stelco in Hamilton because of their men-only hiring policy. Stelco was forced to hire 180 women, Field among them, and she landed a high-profile job working in the coke ovens.

"It was exhilarating and hellish at the same time," Field says of the job that lasted only one year, due to a strike in 1981.

In 1996, Field was named one of "Toronto's Ten Best Organizers" by NOW magazine. Over the past 27 years, she has been involved (and often leading) dozens and dozens of social movements. Hunger, day care, recycling, pay-equity, education and violence against women offers up just a short-list of the issues close to her heart. But in 1991, Field was humbled by an unsuccessful bid for municipal office running against Tony O'Donohue in Ward 3.

"I realized at that point how hard it is for a community activist like myself to fit into the grid of what a traditional politician does," she says, adding that she's happy to be where she is now. "It feels nice to be 45 and to be as angry and committed and as active as I have always been."

**'I get to do so many creative things here that I can't imagine doing anywhere else'**

Enter Morgan, who, in 1992 connected with Field in her new capacity as executive director of FoodShare. It was the fate-filled meeting of an organic food entrepreneur with a social activist — one woman with extensive business knowledge, the other a tried-and-true social activist. Food and hunger was the issue that tied their interests together in one very strong and durable knot. After a few false labors, Field to Table was birthed and born.

"There's a great match between us," says Field. "But there is some tension. Mary Lou is an entrepreneur. She's used to dealing with only one set of constraints, namely — financial constraints, the bottom line. But now that she's with a non-profit organization she has to answer to a board of directors. That's sometimes difficult for her."

But Morgan recognizes both the constraints and the strengths of working within a community-based pro-

gram like FoodShare.

"I get to do so many creative things here that I can't imagine doing anywhere else," says Morgan. "I can build something very complex and have it supported by Debbie who can raise the money, do the public-speaking and keep up the political contacts. Besides, she has a better analytical sense of food politics than I do. Before I came to FoodShare, I didn't understand the complexity and constraints involved in delivering food to low income people."

Indeed, prior to FoodShare, Morgan was busy creating a long list of business accomplishments in the world of health and organic foods.

In 1983, she joined forces with five unemployed people to found The Big Carrot, currently Canada's largest health food supermarket.

Grant MacKinnon, one of the original "gang of five," recalls: "We all had a vision but there was only one person who could really execute it. That was Mary Lou. She helped us expand our vision from its peanut-butter-and-granola-roots to something more sophisticated and polished. We would walk into banks and Mary Lou was the one who could represent us properly."

MacKinnon rhymes off Morgan's strong leadership qualities with ease. "She's a wonderful people-person, she's down-to-earth and she has no pretences. Lots of hippies and fringe-types would walk into our store and even though that wasn't her personal style, Mary Lou could always transcend the differences."

But after seven years at the health food co-op, Morgan had to transcend her differences with her eight Big Carrot partners.

"I wanted to expand. I wanted us to have nine stores... one for each of us," she says with a detectable sparkle in her eyes. "But no one else wanted to expand." So she moved on.

In 1991, she met farming woman Kathryn MacDonald when both were hired as members of the Ontario Farm Products Marketing Commission. They sat on the commission from 1991-1995, and midstream, decided to publish a cookbook called *The Farm and City Cookbook* (1994, Second Story Press).

MacDonald says that Morgan has

tremendous insights into the food system. "She views food as a necessity. She's not radical. She has a sane and logical approach. She's able to work within the system and gain respect from a broad range of people... then she uses that respect to benefit the community."

Back behind the orange door at FoodShare, Morgan and Field get ready for a Toronto Star photo-shoot.

Morgan spots a mound of bright red tomatoes filling an industrial size bowl downstairs in their kitchen. With an eye for what sells, she grabs it. Field says, "The roof!" to Morgan, who nods instantly. Morgan operates an hydraulic lift to send the tomatoes upwards and Field scales a ladder.

The food ladies are off and running. Another idea, another day.

Madeline Greey writes FYI's weekly FOODsmarts column.

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If you can't compost, you can still save valuable landfill space by bagging or bundling your organic yard waste (excluding grass) for curbside collection for composting at Metro's central composting site. Follow these tips for containing your yard waste:

### DO

✓ Leave grass clippings on the lawn as they are not part of yard waste.

✓ Put weeds, plant trimmings and leaves in clear plastic bags or open-top acid

### DO NOT

X Mix food or kitchen waste or pet droppings with organic yard waste.