Making a Connection

"I feel a lot of love here...there's a connection."

-Vicky

She comes clean.

Although the mask hides Vicky's
face, there's no hiding the million-
smile beneath it when she
hears the comment.

She uses her power chair walker to move from the waiting
to where Joe is sitting at his
desk behind the plexiglass in the
second-floor grocery center.

Although Vicky's movements are slow, there is a joyful energy with
each step.

She's not only shopping for
nutritious groceries, but she's also
connecting with a friend.

"What'll it be today, Vicky?" Joe
asks.

Vicky looks at the menu of items
in the display case and begins to
fill out her order.

"I feel like family. I feel like a VIP."

But what she didn't realize then
was her decision to connect with Project Open Hand would lead
her down a path of healthy living through nutrition.

"I started to notice that the
nutritious meals I was eating was
helping me," Vicky said. "Project
Open Hand was the beginning of
my transformation."

And when COVID-19 hit, she

And like family, Project Open
Hand will always "go see about her"
and all its other clients.

Project Open Hand serves over
3,500 wellness clients who are
battling critical illnesses. Thirty
five percent are diagnosed with
HIV/AIDS and 13 percent have a
cardiovascular disease.

Will you help clients, like Vicky,

Thank you!

by Marcus Tolero,
Marketing and Communications Manager
What It Means To Be Connected

Dear Friend,

On the surface, it’s very easy to say we provide a particular service to our community.

You could say we provide our clients with medically-tailored nutrition. More than 2,500 nutritious meals and 200 bags of groceries daily in support of community members in need.

It’s what we do. It helps our clients improve and maintain their health.

But there it much more. It goes well beyond the meals or groceries. It’s a basic and important human need.

Connection.

When clients sign up to receive Project Open Hand services in San Francisco and Alameda counties, they are immediately connected with our staff at different levels of the organization.

Our client services department will reach out to them for intake. Then our team of Registered Dietitian Nutritionists will connect with them for a nutrition counseling and education session.

Then we encourage our clients to take advantage of all other services we offer because we want them to feel connected to Project Open Hand.

Like our cover-story client Vicky, who started with us years ago in Oakland and continued with us when she moved to San Francisco. She not only received meals and groceries, but she also enjoyed meals with new friends in a communal setting at Community Nutrition Program sites in the City. And when she was isolated at home during COVID, her connection with us continued because we delivered meals with love right to her door.

But that same feeling of connection is felt here as well. Like Joe Wicht, whose interactions with clients have a profound effect and give added meaning to our work.

As Joe said in our spotlight story, “…if our clients want to fight hard to live, we will continue to fight with them.” It’s the reason why he, the staff and volunteers go beyond their normal duties because they want to let clients know that they are not alone on their path to better health.

Over 5,500 seniors and adults with disabilities receive meals from us through our Community Nutrition Program. Over 3,500 clients receive meals and fresh groceries through our Wellness Program in San Francisco and Oakland. Over 4,800 volunteers donate their time. Over 120 staff, which includes the kitchen, delivery drivers, and operations staff, work tirelessly from the early morning into the night, every day.

And all of us are all connected in our belief that Meals do Heal. None of this is possible without your continued support. Thank you!

Paul Hepfer
Chief Executive Officer
To help, go to openhand.org.

Read the Latest Issue Brief by the California Food is Medicine Coalition (CalFIMC)

The brief focuses on food and nutrition insecurity, linkages to serious diseases, economic and racial disparities, and the significance of MTM in advancing nutrition and health in California and beyond, particularly in the context of COVID-19.


Paul’s Letter

Project Open Hand Receives Grant From Bayer Fund

Project Open Hand received a grant from Bayer Fund, which will be used to provide medically tailored meals (MTM) to clients with heart disease and cancer and support the nutrition intervention experience for its clients in the East Bay.

“This is a substantial showing of support from Bayer Fund and will greatly impact our work. Many of our clients belong to some of the most vulnerable populations in our East Bay community. Not only do they need access to food, but they also need access to healthy, lifesaving nutrition - and this grant helps us continue to address a critical issue – nutrition security,” said Paul Hepfer, Chief Executive Officer of Project Open Hand.

The grant will not only provide support to our organization, but also the community we serve by allowing us to recruit, enroll, and serve 55 low-income adults diagnosed with stage 3 or 4 cancer or congestive heart failure in the East Bay.

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Project Open Hand's mission is to improve health outcomes and quality of life by providing nutritious meals to the sick and vulnerable, caring for and enriching our community.

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By Marcus Tolero, Marketing and Communications Manager

**What’s Cookin’ During the Holidays**

The holiday season is nearly here and we’ve got a slate of activities for you.

- **Hand to Hand** - Our Annual Hand to Hand Luncheon is in December. Stay tuned!
- **Help us reach our fundraising goal before the new year!** Stay tuned for details.
- **Giving Tuesday** - Support Meals with Love to our clients on Giving Tuesday, November 30th, 2021

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**Project Open Hand Plate Clubs**

Your gift makes a difference. MealTimes offers special acknowledgment to Project Open Hand supporters who have made gifts totaling $1,000 or more from May 1, 2021 through July 31, 2021. If you have questions about this list, please contact donations@openhand.org or 415-447-2300.

**DIAMOND CLUB**
- $100,000 and over
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  - [Estate of Leaving a Legacy](#)
  - [Silver Plate Club](#)

**PLATINUM PLATE CLUB**
- $50,000 - $99,999
  - [Delta Dental Community Care Foundation](#)
  - [Estate of Sylvester James](#)
  - [Shabbir and Ashrafa Anik](#)

**GOLD PLATE CLUB**
- $25,000 - $49,999
  - [Delta Dental Community Care Foundation](#)
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**CRYSTAL PLATE CLUB**
- $5,000 - $9,999
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**SILVER PLATE CLUB**
- $2,500 - $4,999
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**Connections like these between Joe and Vicky are only possible because of your help. Thank you for continuing to make these connections possible. To find out more or to read other stories like this, go to openhand.org/blog**

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Client Engagement Specialist Joe Wicht is a pianist, and a good one. For the past 14 years, he has played at Martuni’s, a popular night spot where patrons belt out tunes to whatever song they ask Joe to cover.

“It’s an open MIC, and I’m the orchestra,” Joe said.

But what he really loves doing is composing his own music to a poem — just don’t ask him to write the words.

“I’m not a wordsmith. I find a poem that says something that I would like to say to someone else. It’s hard to find a poem that doesn’t speak to you about somebody or something you’ve experienced. When I’m composing, I take those words and make it musically to what I would have done,” Joe said.

And if it were his choice, he would do this every minute of the day.

“Piano playing is a great way to earn a living, but it doesn’t come with insurance, which is why the day job comes handy,” Joe says jokingly.

Joe, who grew up in Virginia Beach, Virginia, started his “day job” with Project Open Hand in 2004 after 10 years working as a sign-language interpreter in the San Francisco public school system. He came to Project Open Hand because he wanted to work with adults in a public-service setting, especially those who were diagnosed with HIV.

“I knew this crowd of gay men living with HIV,” Joe said. “It was important for me to get involved in something HIV-related like Project Open Hand. It was a natural fit.”

When he first started, his title was receptionist, which he describes as a hands-off approach in his interactions with clients. He would essentially do his normal duties.

“My duties became very hands-on. I engage our clients. Not only do I try to connect clients to other services in Project Open Hand, I try to encourage clients to link up with each other,” Joe said.

“I want them to create their own sense of community. Not eat dinner alone or lunch alone.”

Every now and then, Joe would arrange to have lunch with clients, like a Community Nutrition Program site.

“I picked up a friendship with Joe, and I’ve met a lot of nice people because of Joe. This community I’m a part of now, I met through Joe,” Vicky said.

Although COVID drastically changed how clients and staff interacted, Joe was still connecting with clients who were sheltering in place by performing calls to check up on their status and find out if they needed help and Project Open Hand services.

Why does Joe go the extra step to connect with clients?

“I love folks that are fighting for all the joy in life, like Vicky,” Joe said. “It gives me a reason to want to be here. If you want to fight this hard, I’m going to fight with you. I’m going to be here when you go through it.”

Although his “day job” as a client engagement specialist takes him away from his piano, he finds inspiration from the connections he’s made with Project Open Hand clients. When a former client passed away, Joe composed a song with a poem in honor of that client.

When asked if there was a particular poem he would compose to music for Vicky, he replied, “I haven’t found the right poem yet that says what I want to say to Vicky. But I will.”

And when he does, she will be the first one to hear it.

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Zucchini Bread

Prep Time: 15 minutes  
Ready in: 60 Minutes  
Yields: 1 Loaf (12 slices)

Ingredients

- 1 egg
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup flour (all purpose or whole wheat)
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- ½ cup raisins
- 1 cup yellow squash or zucchini, shredded

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees and grease a bread loaf pan.
2. In a large bowl, mix eggs, sugar, and oil together.
3. Add flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, salt, vanilla, and raisins.
4. Stir in the squash and mix well.
5. Pour batter into pan.
6. Bake for 40 minutes, or until a toothpick or fork inserted into the center comes out clean.

Thank you to all our restaurant partners and diners who participated in Dining Out For Life East Bay on September 30th.

Because you dined out on this special day at our partnering restaurants, you also supported our efforts in providing life-saving nutrition to individuals diagnosed with HIV.

Thank you to all who dined out to give back!