

# Mealtimes



Cover Story

## You Don't Have to Do It Alone

In a sea of pink, blue, green, and yellow Project Open Hand t-shirts during the San Francisco Pride Parade stands Josh, holding a large Transgender Pride flag. He poses for a photo during the pre-parade lull in front of our float, a 20-foot platform pulled by a white pickup truck.

"It was important to me to show up for Pride," Josh says later, "and show folks just how important Project Open Hand's work is."

Josh has turned to Project Open Hand's services twice now, once after his HIV diagnosis, and again years later when he battled a life-threatening opportunistic infection.

"I had an amazing case manager – Vicki in the Oakland office. I would get five frozen meals and go grocery shopping every week."

When his health stabilized, Josh no longer needed services. Life moved on, and he focused on his career, his relationship, and caring for his mother. But seven years later – just six weeks after his mom passed away – something felt off.

"I had just run myself into the ground, taking care of my mom, not taking my medication consistently, not eating well. I had not been feeling good for a while," he says.

Though he had been diagnosed with HIV years prior, and AIDS sometime after, it hadn't fully sunk in. When he went to the doctor for chest and neck pain, a call came early the next morning.

"The doctor said, 'Josh, I need you to go to the hospital immediately, even if you have to call an ambulance.'"

Josh was septic, a life-threatening condition. He had contracted cryptococcal meningitis, a rare fungal

infection that disproportionately affects people living with HIV/AIDS and it had set off a chain reaction. His CD4 count was around 80, his immune system dangerously compromised.

"Usually, if you're healthy, it would never affect you," Josh says. "But that was my first opportunistic infection as someone living with AIDS."

That's when his diagnosis really sunk in. In 2024, opportunistic infections killed over half a million people living with advanced HIV.

Josh spent a year in and out of the hospital; over two months total, multiple relapses, two kidney shutdowns, twenty-five spinal taps, and numerous transfusions.

He turned back to Project Open Hand for help.

**"The food Project Open Hand serves is medicine. It's been directly tied to my recovery."**

For a while, Josh couldn't walk without assistance, let alone prepare his own meals.

"The times I've used Project Open Hand are the times I've eaten the most consistently and the best quality food," he says. "My energy level went back to normal. I could get through the day and not feel exhausted all the time."

"There's a mental aspect to it, too. It helps you feel happier – knowing that people are on your side, knowing that you have access to food that you don't have to think about."

As HIV/AIDS becomes more manageable, people are living longer but face more health threats like opportunistic infections. That's one reason why Project Open Hand expanded its mission to include folks battling other illnesses, too.

"You can take the best HIV pills every day, but if you're not taking them with nutritious food, your body's not gonna get what it needs. The food Project Open Hand serves is medicine. It's been directly tied to my recovery."

Josh's story reflects why Project Open Hand began its work 40 years ago – providing meals to people living with HIV/AIDS when few others would. His journey shows how far we've come, evolving our services to meet the growing needs of our clients – and continuing to show up when others can't.

Today, Josh is fully recovered. His CD4 count has improved drastically, and he can walk five miles through Golden Gate Park. He's reconnecting with his father, rediscovering his voice, and showing up for others.

"Living in the Bay Area is hard," Josh says. But he's still here, and still standing.

He says he felt like a fraud during Pride this year, because he hadn't volunteered in a while and isn't a current client. But he marched anyway, encouraged by his trans nephew walking in his first parade.

"It was important for me to be loud again," he says. "I'd stopped doing that for a while."

Josh adds that he's grateful for the chance to share his story, and to the folks who make Project Open Hand's work possible.

"If there's someone out there who sees this and needs help, just reach out to Project Open Hand. You don't have to do it alone."

by Kimberly Kollwitz, Director of Communications and Government Affairs



## Paul's Letter

Dear Friend,

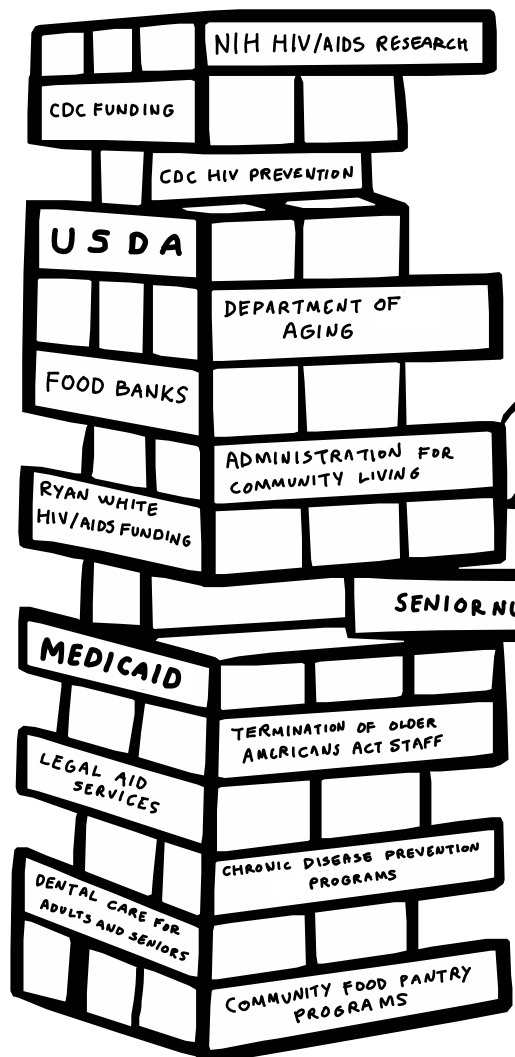
Over the last few months, our team has kept you updated on how shifting public funding and economic instability is impacting Project Open Hand and, most importantly, our clients.

Now, we're seeing the ripple effects of those challenges. Like a Jenga tower, nutrition services are all dependent on one another. When one block, one part of the system, is weakened or removed through funding cuts, rising costs, or increased demand, the entire system is at risk.

This is especially true for nutrition support for older adults and adults living with disabilities in the Bay Area and across the country. Many folks - including clients of our Community Nutrition Program - rely on a patchwork of services to stay nourished and healthy. And when one piece fails, there's rarely a backup. That's why public support of these services is more critical than ever.

The meals clients receive at Project Open Hand are not just nourishing - they heal. These medically tailored meals are evidence-backed and recommended by healthcare providers. They help our clients recover faster, avoid hospital readmissions, and live healthier lives.

Take for example Josh, who you'll read about in our cover story. Josh has



turned to Project Open Hand twice now in his lifetime; once after his HIV diagnosis, and again when a low CD4 count and an opportunistic infection threatened his life.

"You can take the best HIV pills every day, but if you're not taking them with

nutritious food, your body's not gonna get what it needs," says Josh.

Behind every meal for clients like Josh is our expert team. Take for example Madeline, who is featured in our Spotlight Article, Project Open Hand's Culinary Nutritionist who ensures that each dish meets the complex dietary needs of our clients.

Today, we're facing a perfect storm of challenges; rising grocery costs, shrinking safety nets, and government funding cuts - including a recent reduction in funding to our Community Nutrition Program, which will result in at least 100,000 fewer meals next year.

We're doing everything we can to adapt, but we can't do it alone. Your support helps keep the Jenga tower standing. It ensures that no one goes without the nutrition they need to thrive.

With gratitude,

Paul Hepfer, Chief Executive Officer



## Celebrating Two Successful Events



### San Francisco Pride a Huge Success!

Thank you to everyone who showed up and marched with us at San Francisco Pride. This year's contingent was one of our largest ever, and your energy made it unforgettable! Check out all the amazing moments captured in photos now live on our Facebook page.

### 40th Anniversary Hand to Hand Gala Wows Attendees

On September 12, Project Open Hand celebrated 40 years of meals with love at our Hand to Hand Gala. Held at the SF Design Center Galleria, the evening featured emcee Sister Roma and Auctioneer Jamie McDonald, raising vital funds to support our mission. Guests enjoyed gourmet fare, community awards, and an unforgettable evening. Thank you to everyone who attended.



## Upcoming Events

### Saturday, December 27 | Smuin Ballet's LGBTQ+ Night



Lady Camden from RuPaul's Drag Race returns to host Smuin Ballet's LGBTQ+ Night performance and afterparty. A portion of the ticket sales will benefit local LGBTQ+ service organizations, including Project Open Hand. Purchase tickets by scanning the QR code or visiting Project Open Hand's website.

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Project Open Hand  
40 years of meals with love

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 educating our community.

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Kimberly Kollwitz, Director of Communications and Government Affairs

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FOOD=LOVE



# Spotlight: Culinary Nutrition Connects Kitchen and Clients

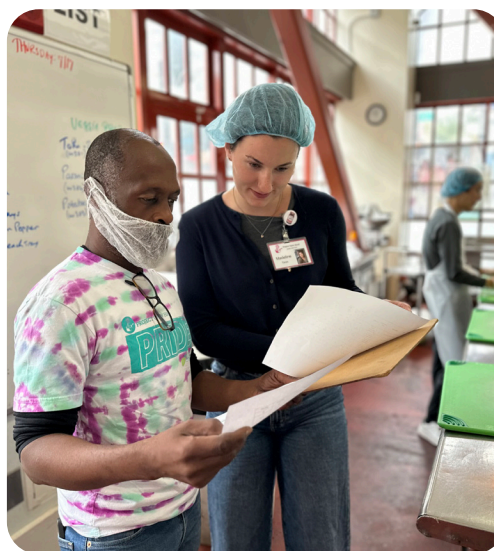
Every one of Project Open Hand's medically tailored meals are meticulously designed to meet the specific dietary requirements of our clients. For instance, clients living with Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) require carefully controlled protein intake to minimize the risk of progressing to End-Stage Renal Disease. Other clients, such as those living with HIV/AIDS, heart disease, or diabetes, require meals with an emphasis on balanced, whole foods such as fresh produce, healthy fats, and lean proteins.

To create these unique menus, Project Open Hand's culinary team works closely with our Culinary Nutritionist, a Registered Dietitian (RD) who ensures that our meals are nutritionally supportive and aligned with the health goals of our clients. This role is just one more way that we connect our kitchen to the people we serve.

We are constantly evaluating and assessing our meals. During biweekly meetings, our Kitchen Director, Head Chef, Culinary Nutritionist, and other Project Open Hand RDs discuss menu adjustments based on changing needs and ingredients, and work to align these changes to an overall



Madeline, Culinary Nutritionist



Chef Adrian and Madeline review menus

**"I love knowing that the work I do ensures the meals we produce support our clients – however they need it."**

goal of increasing plant-based meals, fresh, local vegetables, and culturally appropriate produce.

To implement these changes, Project Open Hand's Culinary Nutritionist Madeline researches potential recipes to fit these changes, ensuring that they meet our rigorous nutrition standards and are feasible to prepare.

Madeline says that she enjoys the role because it combines her two favorite things together - food and nutrition. "And I love knowing

that the work I do ensures the meals we produce support our clients – however they need it," she says.

"I completed my dietetic internship at UCSF Medical Center," says Madeline. "It was there that I saw patients living with diabetes, CKD, and other conditions, and how overwhelming and difficult it can be to manage these conditions with diet. I wanted to find a way to help with that."

Together, our team assesses our meals for a myriad of other things such as the

nutritional accuracy of our labels, the proper portions, and the appearance. In addition, they analyze the meals for flavor, texture, signs of exposure, and overall acceptability.

Once complete, data is collected and summarized, prioritizing potential improvements, themes from testing feedback, and a time is set to retest the recipe again.

"Chronic health conditions can be overwhelming and difficult to manage," says Madeline. "It speaks a lot to what we do here at Project Open Hand, that we can provide clients medically tailored meals when they need it most."

By auditing our meals on a regular basis, we are always working to improve our frozen meals in everything from the taste of our food, its appearance, and client satisfaction.

Culinary Nutritionists play a crucial role in connecting our clients to high-quality nutrition, supporting them on their health journeys.

by the Project Open Hand Team



## Project Open Hand Plate Clubs

**Make a difference.** MealTimes offers special acknowledgment to Project Open Hand supporters who have made gifts totaling \$1,000 or more from April 1, 2025 through June 30, 2025. If you have questions about this list, please contact [donations@openhand.org](mailto:donations@openhand.org) or 415-447-2300.

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\* Designates members of The Supper Club, Project Open Hand's monthly giving program. To learn more about The Supper Club, visit: [openhand.org/give/supper-club](https://openhand.org/give/supper-club).



From Our Kitchen to Yours

## Cinnamon Granola Recipe

Earlier in this issue, we featured Madeline, Project Open Hand's Culinary Nutritionist. This versatile recipe is one of her favorites, and easily customizable when you add nuts or dry fruit.

### Ingredients

- 3 large egg whites
- 2 cups brown rice cereal
- ¼ cup maple syrup or honey
- ½ cup rolled oats
- 2½ tsp cinnamon

### Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. In a large bowl, whisk the egg whites until they're broken up and slightly foamy. Add the maple syrup (or honey) and cinnamon, whisking until fully combined.
3. Add the brown rice cereal and rolled oats, gently folding them into the cinnamon mixture until they're evenly coated.
4. Spread the mixture evenly on the prepared baking sheet. Bake in the preheated oven for 20 minutes. After 20 minutes, gently stir the granola, then bake for an additional 10 minutes. Stir again, then bake for 5 more minutes or until the granola becomes crunchy.
5. Allow the granola to cool for a few minutes before breaking it into clusters. Let it cool completely at room temperature before transferring it to an airtight container. Enjoy!

Recipe credit: Amy's Healthy Baking



## Monthly Gifts Make a Difference



When you join The Supper Club, Project Open Hand's monthly giving community, you'll receive special invitations to members-only activities, exclusive insider access, and more. Your monthly gifts ensure we can get nutritious meals into the hands of those who need it most. Become a member today.

**LIMITED TIME OFFER: Become a Member Today and Receive a Free 40th Anniversary Tote Bag!**



As a special offer, those who donate or join Project Open Hand's Supper Club in September or October will receive a free 40th anniversary tote bag! But hurry, this offer is only good while supplies last!

To learn more, scan the QR code or visit [www.openhand.org/supperclub](http://www.openhand.org/supperclub)



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