

# MealTimes



Cover Story

## Robert's Story

For the last fourteen years, Robert has been both a client and volunteer of Project Open Hand. Monday through Friday, he can be found eating a meal or volunteering at the Ruth Brinker Meal Site.

With a trimmed, white beard, and nearly always wearing a ball cap, Robert is a staple of the Community Nutrition Program (CNP). Among staff, he's known for his sense of humor. When he speaks, there is a faint hint of a New York accent, a nod to his childhood in Brooklyn.

"Well, I just wandered up there one day. I was curious and I went upstairs," he says.

Robert's talking about the first time he went to Curry Senior Center, which was not long after he moved to San Francisco. It's one of ten locations that Project Open Hand's Community Nutrition Program (CNP) serves. The vast majority of CNP clients live at or below the federal poverty line, which is less than \$16,000 a year.

Before San Francisco, Robert lived a life shaped by whatever work he could find. A jack of all trades, he's been a security guard, a fast-food worker, a meat packing plant employee, and has even worked at an offshore oil rig.

When he moved out to San Francisco, he was quickly faced with the city's financial realities. "I finally got my social security a few years in[to living in the city]," he says, "but that wasn't enough either."

One thing he can always count on, though, is a warm, nutritious meal from Project Open Hand.

Robert lives with diabetes and high

blood pressure, which he manages with insulin and medication. He says he notices the difference, both physically and mentally, when he eats a Project Open Hand meal.

"The food here is healthy - much healthier than what I used to eat," he says. "It's all good, nourishing food. I feel better, more energized."

"At my age, just getting out of bed is a hobby," he jokes. He turns 79 next month. "One day a few years ago I got really sick." He stayed in the hospital for over three days. After that, Robert started going to the Ruth Brinker Meal Site because it was closer to his apartment.

Still, the sense of community remained the same.

"You get to know a lot of people over the years. It's nice, kind of like a family," he says.

**"My hope [...] is that this organization can keep serving the community for years to come, and go on for another 40 years."**

Erika Wong, Director of CNP (who Robert affectionately refers to as his "little sister") says that Robert's commitment to Project Open Hand runs deep. "His support is a reminder that some people embody the spirit of service," she says. "He's truly a gift to our community. He's the kind of person who reminds us why this work matters."

Recently, Robert faced another health setback and was hospitalized with a bladder issue. During recovery, he depended on Project Open Hand's frozen meals.

"I just had one this morning before I came over," he says, smiling. "I ate the tofu meal for breakfast!"

Over 10,000 San Franciscans rely on Project Open Hand's Community Nutrition Program each year. The program, operating for over 30 years, provides older adults (age 60+) and adults living with disabilities with nourishing meals throughout the city.

"Often, the people who come to us are on a small, fixed income," Erika Wong says, "looking to find community and to supplement their meals."

The return on this community investment is significant. Project Open Hand's medically tailored nutrition (MTN) for CNP is formulated to support the health impacts of aging.

Studies show that MTN prevents further illness and costly health complications that strain our public health system. MTN can reduce overall medical expenses by up to 40%, while also lowering hospital stays and the risk of readmission. In 2025, 84% of Project Open Hand participants reported improving or maintaining their health, and 79% reported they improved or sustained medication adherence, or taking medications as prescribed.

In June, rising costs and a strapped city budget led to funding reductions for Project Open Hand's Community Nutrition Program. Breakfast service was reduced, and weekend meals, which had been running for over a decade, were eliminated. While Project Open Hand continues to maintain the program, the impacts of those reductions linger.

"My hope for Project Open Hand," Robert says, "is that this organization can keep serving the community for years to come, and go on for another 40 years."



## Paul's Letter

Dear Friend,

In the last few years, you've probably heard the phrase "these are uncertain times" more often than you can count. It's in articles, conversations, and casual conversation amongst friends. And while it may feel overused, the truth remains: These are, and continue to be, uncertain times.

So much is going on nationally and locally that has created an atmosphere of deep instability for many communities and families.

We feel this uncertainty every day at Project Open Hand.

Across the country, charitable organizations face an increasingly competitive landscape for funding. Private donations, public government funding, and foundational money - all of these traditional sources of revenue have decreased drastically in the last decade while the cost of delivering services has risen.

At the same time, doors to other

agencies close. Public services are reduced. Economic challenges place new people in our food and service lines. And demand for Project Open Hand's services continues to grow.

It's only because of the dedication of Project Open Hand supporters like you that we can continue to show up, every day, for the people who depend on us.

One of the ways we counteract rising costs is through the extraordinary generosity of our volunteers. This April we're celebrating National Volunteer Month. Last fiscal year alone, more than one million volunteer hours at Project Open Hand translated into over \$3 million in essential services to our organization.

Volunteers like Gary, who recently shared with me that he made his first home deliveries the week before Thanksgiving in 1992. "What keeps me involved," he says, "is that Project Open Hand has never strayed from its mission."

Or volunteers like Robert, who we

spotlight in our cover story article, and who came to us first as a client and later as a volunteer, remind us of the invaluable support we give to - and receive from - to our community.

Every hour served, every meal prepared, and every dollar contributed all have a profound impact. And while the forces working against vulnerable communities are growing, the need for our services increases. But even so, our commitment to serving meals with love is unwavering. And we can't do it alone - or without you.

Thank you for your continued support to Project Open Hand through uncertainty, change, and the challenges that lie ahead.

With gratitude,

Paul Hepfer  
Chief Executive Officer



## Upcoming Events



**Dining Out For Life:**  
Thursday, April 16



Dine out at a participating restaurant on Thursday, April 16 and a portion of your bill will be donated to support the free, local HIV prevention and care services through Project Open Hand and the SF AIDS Foundation.



**Hand to Hand Gala:**  
Friday, September 18



Save the date for Project Open Hand's biggest fundraiser of the year! Get ready to sip champagne, eat delicious food, celebrate our awardees, bid on amazing auction items, and party the night away for a great cause.

For more information, visit our website at [www.openhand.org/events](http://www.openhand.org/events)

Questions? Interested in Sponsorship Opportunities? Reach out to our team at [events@openhand.org](mailto:events@openhand.org)



From Our  
Kitchen  
to Yours

### Carrot Ginger Soup

The secret to creamy soup without heavy cream or potatoes is simmering carrots with a small amount of rice. The ginger adds a warm, spicy kick and complements carrots' natural sweetness to create a balanced flavor profile.

#### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 yellow onions, chopped
- 1 ½ pound carrots, roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon grated ginger
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- 4 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
- 2 tablespoons uncooked brown rice
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Pepper to taste

#### Directions

1. Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high. Add onions, carrots, and salt; cook 5-8 minutes until soft. Add ginger and cook 30 seconds.
2. Cook, stirring occasionally, until soft, about 5-8 minutes. Add ginger and sautee until fragrant, about 30 seconds.
3. Add broth and rice. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat, cover, and simmer 35-45 minutes, until carrots and rice are very tender.
4. Remove from heat and puree with an immersion blender, or blend in small batches in a blender (cover blender lid with a towel to prevent lid popping off from steam).
5. Remove the pot from the heat and puree with an immersion blender or puree in small batches in a blender. If using a blender, blend in small batches and cover the lid with a towel to prevent the lid from popping off.
6. Return soup to pot. Add lemon juice and pepper.

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Project Open Hand  
meals with love

At Project Open Hand we believe in the healing power of nutrition. Medically tailored nutrition is essential in addressing illness, supporting aging with dignity, and reducing social disparities.

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FOOD=LOVE



# Spotlight: Where Compassion Meets Community: Celebrating Our Volunteers

Every day at Project Open Hand, volunteers transform raw ingredients into something far greater than a meal. They chop vegetables, portion meals with care, greet clients by name, and deliver groceries with a smile that often means more than the bag itself. In doing so, they create connection. They create comfort. They create the steady, reliable care that thousands of neighbors count on while living with serious health conditions. April is Volunteer Appreciation Month, and we are proud to celebrate the people whose hands, hearts, and commitment make our mission possible.

Step into our Kitchen or Grocery Center on any weekday morning and you'll see the heartbeat of Project Open Hand in motion. Volunteers move with purpose, sorting produce, assembling medically tailored meals, organizing dry goods, and preparing deliveries that will reach our neighbors across the Bay. Conversations begin over a cutting board and end in shared laughter. This is where nourishment begins, not just for clients, but for everyone who walks through our doors. Several of the populations served by Project Open Hand are at increased risk for malnutrition, including older adults, people living with heart failure, those receiving dialysis, people experiencing food insecurity, people living with cancer, and other chronic conditions.

Ask any longtime volunteer why they return week after week, and you'll hear a common theme: connection. Volunteers form friendships over cutting boards, celebrate milestones together, and support one another through life's ups and downs. Clients feel that connection



too. A familiar face at the grocery counter or a warm greeting during delivery can turn an ordinary moment into one of comfort and reassurance.

## Your Impact Reaches Far Beyond the Kitchen

Last year, volunteers contributed over 35,000 hours of service. That generosity allows us to stretch resources, expand services, and meet rising community need without compromising quality or compassion.

But numbers only tell part of the story. The real impact lives in moments:

- A client receiving a meal that helps them stay healthy enough to remain independent
- A volunteer learning a new skill and finding confidence in the kitchen
- A team of coworkers bonding during a group shift
- A longtime volunteer mentoring someone new
- A client smiling when they recognize the same friendly face delivering groceries each week

## Thank You for Being the Heart of Project Open Hand

To every volunteer, whether you've been with us for 40 years or joined last week, thank you! Your service is a gift. You help us uphold our values of dignity, inclusion, and compassion. You help us ensure that every person we serve receives not just a meal, but care. We hope you feel celebrated this month and every month.

**"I volunteer because I have so much and everyone is so friendly."**

– Daphne, Warehouse Volunteer since 2014

## Get Involved

If you've been thinking about volunteering, April is the perfect time to get involved. Whether you prefer kitchen work, grocery packing, client interaction, or event support, there's a role that fits your interests and schedule. Sign up for a volunteer shift and be part of a community that nourishes our community with love. Scan the QR code now or visit [www.openhand.org/volunteer](http://www.openhand.org/volunteer)



by Diana Contreras,  
Senior Director of Volunteer and Grocery Operations



## 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 October 1, 2025 through December 31, 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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