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Traveling Cowboy: Tony's story

by Tara Blake Marketing Communications Officer

Having traveled the nation for years, Tony considers himself a San Francisco cowboy. While going place to place in his many travels, he saw an advertisement. They were hiring for a tow truck driver and the ad had the promising words "WILL TRAIN" sketched underneath. After two weeks on the field, Tony had decided on a job for the rest of his life.

"I loved it, I got to go out and help people every day. It was a fun job." True to his word, Tony drove the truck for 22 years.

Over time, he began noticing problems with his vision. He seemed constantly thirsty. Something wasn't right.

"I got checked out and they said, 'Oh god, how do you feel? Your sugar level is so high we can't even read it.' It was over 700."

"The doctor asked me in awe, 'Why aren't you in a diabetic coma?' I assumed it was because of my drug addiction. At that time in my life, I hit rock bottom because of drugs and I couldn't go any further down."

Tony has since been clean and sober for three years, but has no trouble recalling his past life, openly admitting to being addicted to a variety of drugs for over 30 years.

"I guess you would have called me a functional addict; an everyday user. I was never that addict you see on the street. I knew how to take care of myself; I slept, I ate, I drank water. And my philosophy was to never let anyone come along with me on that journey." Tony's voice gets stronger, and it's obvious he has a sense of pride in that statement.

Tony changes the subject and with little doubt in his voice, he blurts, "I'm pretty sure I became diabetic over sodas! I would drink a 6 pack a day, easily. When it was hot out and I was driving a tow truck all day; I would drink them the entire day."

Project Open Hand originally created a meal plan specifically for diabetics in 2007 and it's still a diet option today. Approximately 12% of wellness clients served have a diabetes diagnosis.

Tony sits in silence for minutes, and moves his gaze up to the ceiling, as if a new focal point will help spark memories to flood back into his mind. It worked.

Homeless and broke,
Tony told
himself there
was no better time
than in that moment
to change, so he did. He
adds "I was so tired. I he

adds, "I was so tired. I began my sobriety and just kept sleeping most of the time. Eventually my energy level came back."



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Project Open Hand

meals with love

openhand.org

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Project Open Hand's mission is to nourish and engage our community by providing *meals* with love to the sick and the elderly.

MealTimes is published quarterly for the friends and clients of Project Open Hand.

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SERVING CLIENTS WITH CREATIVITY AND DETERMINATION

Creativity and determination go a long ways toward finding a solution.

I grew up hearing this from my dad, a Texas peace officer, every time I faced a challenge and considered backing away. "Well son," he says, now retired, but still reminding me of it to this day, "just put your mind to it and get to gettin.'"

In the last 60 days, Project Open Hand has been getting going by launching two new programs to address the lack of nutritious food.

During Christmas week, we partnered with the San Francisco Department of Aging and Adult Services to open a community dining room on site at Project Open Hand. Every single day of the year, we serve a delicious hot lunch in our beautiful, light-filled dining room on the corner of Polk and Willow. The first of its kind in the City serving the critically ill, our program hit capacity just 30 days in. We've been able to create a warm, welcoming space for our clients to gather, laugh, and learn about nutrition and eat a healthy meal that meets their medical

conditions.

Then just three weeks later, our first Project Open Hand "pop up" van arrived. Following the core tenet of social work, we'll be driving into the most under-served neighborhoods and meeting our clients where they are by bringing our complete program, meals, groceries and dietitians, to the communities of the Mission, Visitacion Valley, Bayview, and



Hunter's Point. Clients who have difficulty engaging outside their neighborhoods due to stigma or transportation will now have access to the complete POH model right in their own backyards.

We have always been creative and determined at Project Open Hand and now we're doing even more to ensure barrier-free access to our important services. We can become the bridge that brings folks into care through our *meals* with love.

And during these anxious times, our continued efforts will bring stability and hope.

Mark Ryle, LCSW CEO, Project Open Hand

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STAFF

spotlight VICKIE GUISTI

Having spent 28 years on staff to date, Vickie Giusti is deeply embedded in the mission of Project Open Hand. Born in Richmond, she left the Bay Area to attend high school in Davis, but found herself "dying to come back" once she graduated in 1971.

During the early years of Project Open Hand, Vickie met with founder Ruth Brinker and friends to discuss expanding Ruth's vision to the East Bay, where Vickie still works as client caseworker. At the time, her friends were dying of AIDS nearly every day and she felt angry about it, but was determined to do something.

"Ruth wanted to feed everyone in the world, so the process didn't take long to expand to the East Bay. She was ready to do anything, she didn't care. I mean, we were cooking out of kitchens! She didn't necessarily know about finances and everything else there is to starting an organization, Ruth just wanted to feed people. So, we began as volunteers, and our first day serving in the East Bay was coincidentally the day of the 1989 earthquake."

Today, Vickie is bringing her extraordinary determination to our *meals* with love and was recently honored with a Community Service Award from the Office of AIDS Administration in Oakland for her incredible achievements in empowering those living with HIV/AIDS.

Vickie speaks of Project Open Hand founder fondly, saying, "Ruth would come up with an idea, and just beat on that idea until it got done. She was so tenacious." Vickie has carried that torch well for our team, and has proven to be just as relentless in her work to better the lives of our clients every day.



Vickie showing off her hard earned Community Service Award from the Office of AIDS Administration in Oakland.



In 1991, the Oakland Tribune wrote about Eva Norman, a San Francisco resident who would bake and decorate birthday cakes for Project Open Hand clients. Today, we're still distributing birthday cupcakes to all of our clients, like Felix and Lyudmila Elbert (pictured right).

PEOPLE OAKLAND TRIBUTES

1991:

Birthday cakes via BART

Eve Norman, of Oakland, who works as a bookkeeper for a San Francisco law firm, always wanted to do something for people with AIDS. Then she heard about the birthday cake program of Project Open Hand, which tries to

day cake program of Project Open Hand, which tries to remember each client on his or her birthday.

"I love to cook and bake," she said, so this was just up her alley. So for two years, now, she has been baking cakes and decorating them with the names of people given her by Project Open Hand. Then she carries the cakes on BART to Open Hand in San Francisco for distribution throughout the Bay Area. Norman is one of four volunteer cake bakers, and with some 12 birthdays a week, more bakers would be welcome. Volunteers also are needed to deliver meals in Oakland or Berkeley and for many other tasks. Interested? Call 548-8909.





Feliks (who just turned 80!) poses with his wife, Lyudmila, after picking up his birthday cupcake from our Grocery Center



TOM NOLAN: Volunteer Service Award

It was sometime in 1955, in the quaint little railroad town of Waverly, New York, when a ten-year-old Tom Nolan heard a passenger train whistle blowing by – signaling an inner-hunch that he was destined for far-off places.

"I remember peeking through the dining car windows passing by each night, thinking, 'I wonder where they're going? Well, I wanna go somewhere, too," recalls the now 71-year-old Nolan with his softspoken-meets-stoic presence. "I didn't care where. I just wanted to go."

And off he went – packing his ambition within the values of justice, fairness and kindness instilled by his railroad mechanic father and schoolteacher mother.

There were many memorable stops in the stations of Tom Nolan's life – including a foundation of fighting for civil rights, political activism, sit-ins, anti-war protests and even exploration of theology as a graduate student at Duke University. This was followed by the start

of a budding political career as chairman of the Democratic Committee in Virginia.

On Halloween
of 1976, shortly
after his threeyear marriage
fell apart, Nolan
visited San
Francisco. That's
where an aging
drag queen-bartender
serving



Tom with founder Ruth Brinker, 1997

up drinks at the now long-gone Oil Can Harry's bar on the corner of Larkin and Ellis took the not-yet-entirely-out-of-the-closet Tom Nolan by the hand. With cigarette ash dripping from a gray-whiskered five-o-clock-shadow, the unnamed queen said to Tom, "Honey, don't ever accept anything less than what you truly want."

That's when Tom Nolan knew he had reached his final destination.

"I was gay. I was in San Francisco. I was home."

Tom spent the following several years dedicating himself to public service. He was one the first openly gay elected officials in the country, and first gay president on a board of supervisors in California (San Mateo County), advocating tirelessly for issues ranging from transportation to the environment to gay rights.

In 1994, he received an invitation to interview for the position of executive director of Project Open Hand. There were among 80+ candidates competing for the position, but Nolan's reputation as a gay pioneer and proven track record for social and legislative change stood out.

"Tom Nolan has a demonstrated commitment to AIDS, and a unique talent for bringing people of diverse backgrounds together," said then chair-elect of the Project Open Hand Board Dr. Molly Cooke, when the news was announced. "Tom is just the ticket for the next phase of our service to the Bay Area."

During his tenure as executive director of Project Open Hand, Tom Nolan expanded services beyond HIV to help those battling critical illnesses such as breast cancer and diabetes; orchestrated the launch of our senior meals program and led the way in a successful campaign to purchase the Project Open Hand building at 730 Polk Street.

"Project Open Hand saved me," recalls Nolan, who in his 40s at the time, knew more about death than most folks did in their 70s. He had seen San Francisco change from a party town to ground zero of the AIDS epidemic.

"At one point it looked to me like everybody I knew was going to die. I can't tell you how many funerals I had been to or spoken at. I would adjourn meetings at the board of supervisors in memory of someone who had died."

"Tom was one of the most amazingly compassionate persons I've ever known," said Project Open Hand Distribution Manager Scott Yowell, who worked with Nolan for five years. Yowell recently presented the "Tom Nolan Volunteer Service Award," at a special tribute in the Project Open Hand kitchen. The award named in Tom's honor will be presented each April to those who have dedicated one year or more of service in helping serve meals with love.

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Every gift makes a difference. In each issue of MealTimes, we give special acknowledgement to our supporters who have reached a total of \$1,000 or more during the previous quarter (Ocotber 1, 2016 through December 31, 2016) . Your generosity enables us to provide nourishing food to so many of our neighbors. If you have questions about this list, please contact John McArdle, Director of Development, at jmcardle@openhand.org or (415) 447-2413.

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Hand's monthly giving

TONY'S STORY Continued from page 1

Tony has a crackle in his voice and his unsteady tone suggests pain so palpable it can make anyone ache just hearing of it. "I'm happier than I've ever been now, and I didn't think it was possible before." He fixates his eyes out the window of Project Open Hand's third story conference room—eyes that have been holding swelling tears for minutes until they finally drop. He apologizes and shrugs unexpectedly.

Sobriety quickly changed Tony's health. He continued to work on rebuilding his life and found community by volunteering at Glide Memorial Church, and shortly after, becoming a client at Project Open Hand.

"There was a time when I couldn't read these words." He picks up a Kleenex box sitting on the table and points to the fine print on it. "There was so much sugar in my blood, everything was foggy. My A1C was 17 at one point, and now it's 6.7. Project Open Hand helped with that."

Tony's blood pressure is now nearly perfect and he is more consistent with his medications. Living on

a fixed income, he sometimes finds himself having to choose between doctor visits and medication, or food.

"It is because of Project Open Hand that I can get to my doctor appointments because I can afford transportation now," he adds. "If it came to seeing the doctor or eating, I wouldn't be seeing the doctor. I don't have to choose between the two now because of Project Open Hand."

Tony wraps up the conversation by commenting on Project Open Hand's tagline: *meals with love*. It reminds him of his mother. Originally from Central America, Tony's mother loved to cook and everyone used to go to their house to eat. He looks down as he mentions that she passed away from leukemia.

"She'd be tickled pink to see where I'm at in my life now," he says recuperating with a quick comment. "She'd say, 'It's about time!"

Tony smirks, and concludes, "but she knows."

Recipe FROM OUR KITCHEN TO

CHICKEN EGGPLANT PROVENÇAL

Serves 6

ingredients

1 1/3 tsp. olive oil

¾ c. fresh leeks, sliced into ½" pieces

1 ½ **c.** fresh mushrooms, sliced

½ c. fresh red peppers, diced into 1/2" cubes

2 tbsp. fresh garlic, minced

½ tsp. dried oregano

2 tbsp. fresh parsley leaves, chopped

1 ¾ c. fresh eggplant, cubed 1/4"

¼ c. canned tomato paste

¼ c. water

½ c. red wine (substitute chicken stock, if desired)

6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, 4 oz. each

directions

- 1. Heat a heavy skillet over medium flame. Add oil, leeks, mushrooms, red pepper and garlic. Sauté until leeks are softened.
- 2. Stir in oregano, parsley and eggplant. Add tomato paste, and stir until vegetables are coated.
- 4. Stir in water and wine (or stock). Heat evenly.
- 5. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Place chicken in skillet and cook for 3 minutes on each side.
- 6. Remove chicken from skillet, place into baking dish and top with sauce.
- 7. Reduce heat to 350 degrees F, bake for 15 minutes.

