

Published September 26th, 2012

## Muffin People Always Rise to the Occasion

Cathy Dausman



Back and middle rows from left: Rich Laufenberg, Ron Mayo, Bob Campbell, Dick Kostyrka, Tom Coull, Jack Dice, Michael Bloomstein, Dick Vaughn, Ellis Langley, Pepper Wardle; Front row from left: Mary Lou Blumer, Darwin Marable, Debbie Koo, John McGhee, Dan Hagan, Leslie Schriener, John Di Palermo and Chuck Blay Photo Andy Scheck

We never know what's going to be in [the delivery boxes]," she says.

Muffin People was founded 26 years ago by John McGhee, who enlisted a men's fellowship group from Moraga's St. Monica Church, but current administrator Jack Dice emphasizes "this is not a Catholic organization, it is an organization of people wanting to do good." At one stop years ago, a shelter client anticipating a breakfast treat noted the volunteers' arrival by announcing, "Here comes the Muffin Man," and the name stuck.

Since its membership has grown to include roughly 30 percent women, the organization rebranded itself Muffin People. Muffin People volunteers range in age from 50 to 70-something, and work at least one four-hour shift in the morning each month.

Dice estimates the group collects about \$1.25 million in donated food annually. The present staff of 40 volunteers includes school teachers, doctors, an engineer and a contractor. They are, says Dice, a "well educated and very dedicated group," who become friends with fellow volunteers.

Although volunteers are not reimbursed for their gas and time, Dice says "there is a satisfaction when you finish the day that is indescribable." Trader Joe's Store Captain Patrick Andress says the Muffin People he has met are "diligent and very professional. They do a wonderful job."

On a recent Wednesday at the Trader Joe's loading dock Andrew Brainerd helped Muffin People Ray Casabonne, David Caraska and Rich Laufenberg load the day's food contribution. The contents of more than a dozen grocery crates and several full-sized shopping carts were packed into two pickup truck beds and overflowed into the back seat.

"We're just happy someone can use this food," says Brainerd, adding the alternative would be to throw it away. Laufenberg estimated his open truck bed held 1,500 pounds of food. "If I see a highway patrol car following me with its wipers moving frosting off the windshield, I'll know I didn't tie the load down," he jokes. Sometimes the load really does overwhelm.

There are days when food delivery drivers approach Dice directly to take excess food, and he tells them, "I can't take any more."

It's one reason why Muffin People are always looking for new volunteers.

Dice pairs potential volunteers with a current Muffin People driver until they learn the route. He says six or seven weeks into the work they are "hooked for life."

"People treat us so nice," Dice says, adding in the end the work "gets into your soul."

For information about Muffin People, call Jack Dice at (925) 376-7189. To learn more about packaged food viability, visit the USDA fact sheet at [www.fsis.usda.gov/Factsheets/Food\\_Product\\_dating/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Factsheets/Food_Product_dating/).

When you combine 52 pounds of butter, 80 dozen eggs, cheese, milk, 12 boneless legs of lamb, salmon, chicken, 192 kosher turkeys, three dozen cases of orange juice, Beckmann's Bakery bread, dairy, produce and flowers, it sounds like quite a party. But these groceries do not stay in Lamorinda.

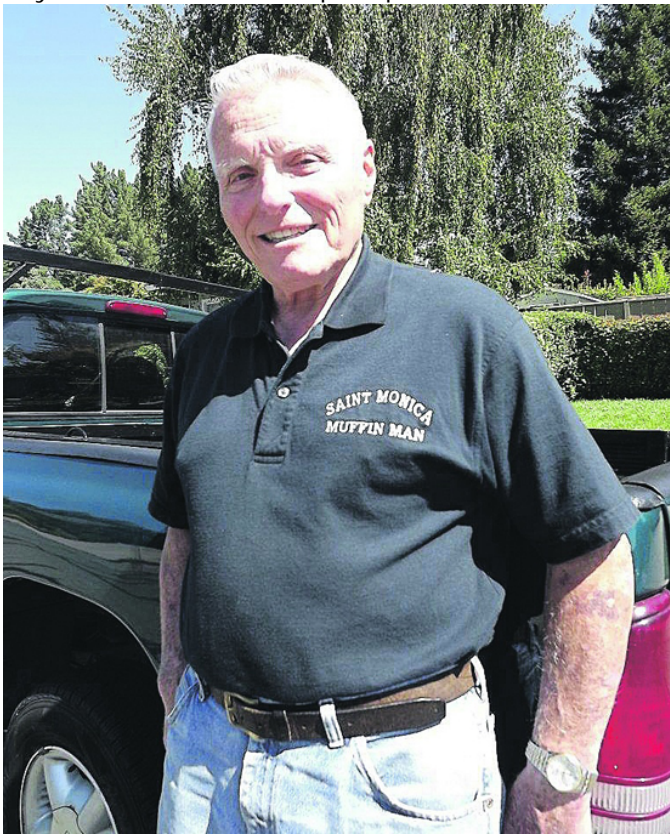
This donated food which has approached its "sell by," but not "use by" date has been removed from grocery shelves at Diablo Foods, Lunardi's, Orinda and Lafayette Safeway, Lamorinda Starbuck's, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and Oakland's L C Food International, and is destined for shelters and non-profits in Oakland, delivered with a smile by volunteers who call themselves the Muffin People.

Six to seven days a week volunteers load up their own trucks and vans with hundreds of pounds of food, use their own gas and make the drive to Oakland, delivering groceries to St. Mary's Center, A Friendly Place, Mother Wright Foundation, St. Mary's Gardens, St. Vincent de Paul and Oak Center Towers.

Several days a week each organization gladly accepts donations. "They're great people; they love doing what they do," says Joel Wright, of Mother Wright Foundation. "My mom (founder Mary Ann Wright) would be very proud of them." Sister Deanine Medina, director of A Friendly Place says her shelter treasures its daily deliveries from Muffin People, calling it "a lifeline of food" and "a wonderful ministry."



Ray Casabonne loads his pickup with food for Oakland Shelters Photos Cathy Dausman



Jack Dice

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