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## Muffin People Always Rise to the Occasion

... continued from page A1



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

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"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."

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 Address 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/).

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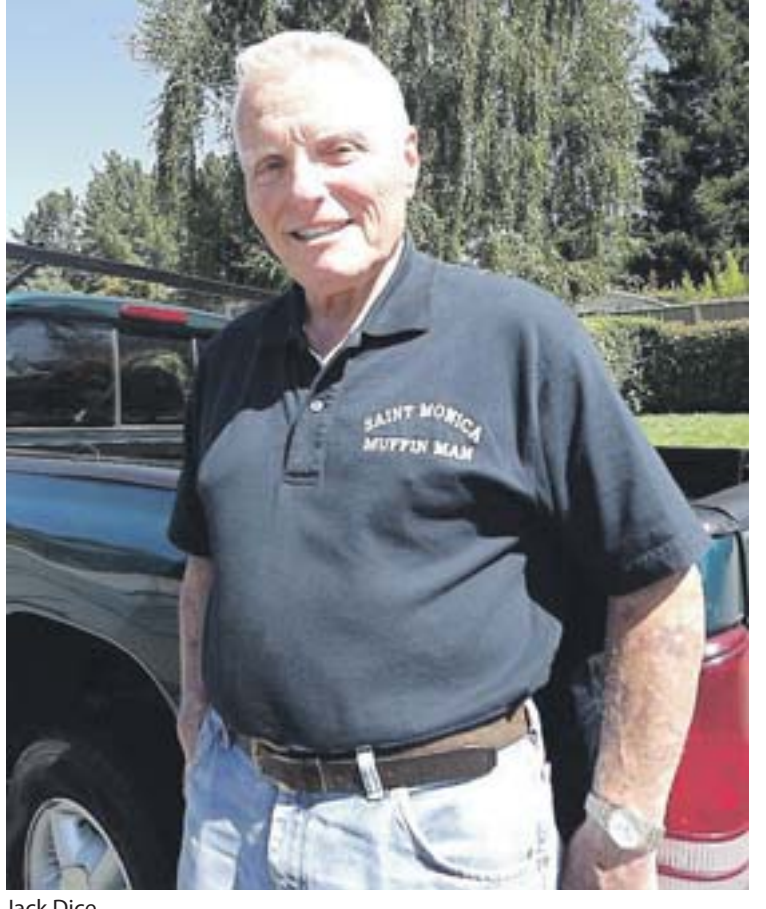


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Jack Dice

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