



Ronald's Story: Food Is Medicine

Before I got connected with Food For Thought through my health care provider, I was doing everything wrong. For about 15 years, I ate nothing but fast food. This lifestyle was terrible for my health. I have congestive heart failure, pulmonary hypertension and poor kidney function. I've battled serious medical conditions as well as drug addiction for years and I've ended up in the hospital many times. Most of my doctors have told me it's important to eat healthy food, but that was hard to do, especially when you are the only one in the house trying to make healthy choices.

I have been on FFT's Medically Tailored Meals Program (MTM) for about a month now. The program has made it much easier for me to stay on track. I like the meals. They taste good and take the guesswork out of food choices. I also really like the educational information included in the program. FFT provides one-on-one nutrition counseling and healthy eating tips. I really like spicy food and often put a few dashes of hot sauce on my meals, but many brands have lots of salt. I've learned that Tabasco® sauce, which is low in sodium, is a good choice for adding flavor to food if you are on a sodium-restricted diet. I've also discovered healthy grain options like quinoa.

"I really appreciate that FFT's team is so responsive and concerned for my health and wellbeing."

Food For Thought's client services team has been incredibly supportive. The first meals that I received included strips of meat. I have some dental issues that make it difficult for me to chew so I let Food For Thought know and they began sending me meals including ground meat and other soft food ingredients. I really appreciate that FFT's team is so responsive and concerned for my health and wellbeing.

In just a month, I've gone from weighing 204 to 197 pounds. I haven't been back to the doctor since starting the program, but I am starting to feel better. Pulmonary hypertension makes it difficult to breathe and losing weight can help. I have a device at home that monitors my oxygen levels, and I can already see an improvement. Oxygen levels are so important to overall health, so I am happy to be breathing better.

The MTM program does require discipline on my part. I know that I can't lapse into unhealthy eating habits, but with FFT's help I feel like I have support and the opportunity to learn how to make better food choices. I also have a personal motivation: I really love my son and want to be there for him. I don't want to miss seeing him grow up.

For more information about the Medically Tailored Meals Program, contact Client Services Director **Nina Redman** at NinaR@FFTfoodbank.org or (707) 887-1647 ext. 119

Ways to Give



A Message From Ron . . .

In July, I celebrated my 25th year as executive director at Food For Thought. I remember my first impressions of the agency—the commitment of the volunteers, the level of care and compassion in virtually all interactions and the focus and dedication to serving our clients. Although I was hired for an interim three months, I was so moved and impressed that I applied for the permanent job and am still here today!

Food For Thought has changed and evolved over the years, with vast improvements in the quantity and quality of our food and an expansion of services to people with a range of serious medical conditions. I am very proud of one thing that has not changed—the compassion,

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generosity and kindness expressed by the agency’s volunteers, donors and staff. Our motto is “healing with food and love,” and for most of our clients, the love part is as important as the food we distribute.

For most of our history, we have actively participated in the development of the Food Is Medicine movement, demonstrating that nutritious food greatly improved the health of our clients living with HIV. In this issue, we provide some detail about how the movement got started, FFT’s involvement in the California Food Is Medicine Coalition and our advocacy efforts. Our cover story highlights the difference our Medically Tailored Meals Program is making for a client living with congestive heart failure.

In reflecting on my years at FFT, the need to remain flexible and to adjust quickly to changing circumstances has been a constant. The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in perhaps the most demanding year in the history of the agency and the launch of our COVID-19 Nutrition Program. Although COVID-19 vaccines are now readily available, the Delta variant continues to spread in Sonoma County, and we continue to offer this vital nutrition program.

We have just completed and posted our Annual Report online which includes more specifics about the challenges and highlights of last year. Perhaps the most valuable lesson we learned from the pandemic was that we can stretch to help meet the nutrition needs of more people living with serious medical conditions. It has also underscored the overwhelming need for our services by additional underserved groups in our community. FFT is very proud to be launching two new programs this summer, offering our tried-and-true model of nutrition assistance to people who are pregnant and cancer patients who are at risk of malnutrition.

To all of our donors and volunteers, we are incredibly grateful for your partnership! It is truly because of you that Food For Thought is able to provide lifesaving food—as well as compassion and kindness—to so many of our neighbors in need.

In Service,

Ron Karp, Executive Director

Ways to Give

Here are some ways you can help provide food + love to more than 4,000 of our Sonoma County neighbors in need:

Make an Online Donation

You can easily make a gift to Food For Thought on our website: FFTfoodbank.org/take-action

Leave A Legacy

“Our confidence in Food For Thought is just one reason we’ve decided to become legacy donors and put Food For Thought in our will. That so many of Food For Thought’s clients are also active volunteers and donors shows us how unique this organization truly is.”

— Larry Prager & Linda Myszak



Recently, Food For Thought introduced FreeWill, a new online tool to help you write a will or trust, for free. We shared this tool in the spirit of providing accessible resources to plan for your future and protect the people you love.

Nearly 70% of Americans don’t have an updated legal will or trust. FreeWill removes the expensive legal costs associated with writing a will or trust and takes 20 minutes or less to complete. It offers an easy way to plan for your future and get peace of mind about your legacy.

The tool can also be used to create estate planning documents like a living will (also known as Advanced Healthcare Directive) or Financial Power of Attorney, and you can opt to leave a legacy with Food For Thought by creating a bequest gift, to ensure every person in Sonoma County with a serious medical condition has access to healthy food. To get started, FFTfoodbank.org/leave-a-legacy

Annual Report

2020 was undoubtedly the most demanding year in the history of Food For Thought. It presented unique challenges requiring us to make unprecedented adaptations. We quadrupled the amount of clients we served from 2019 to 2020. The sense of teamwork and the community support we received from our volunteers, staff and donors was amazing. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who helped feed our clients.



You can view the PDF online or download and print a copy. Please visit: FFTfoodbank.org/newsletters

Questions

If you have questions about any of these ways to give, please contact Karen Gardner, development director, at (707) 887-1647 ext. 102 or KarenG@FFTfoodbank.org

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Fish Tacos

FFT's healthier version of this Baja style taco favorite includes grilled fish instead of fried. This tasty dish is a perfect light summer meal.
(Serves 4)

Ingredients & Instructions:

For the Tacos:

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper, freshly ground
- 1 pound white fish fillets (e.g. tilapia, catfish, etc.)
- 8 tortillas
- 2 avocados
- 4 cups shredded cabbage (can be from a pre-made coleslaw mix)
- 2 limes, cut into wedges

In a small bowl, whisk together the oil, lime juice, salt and pepper. Pour over the fish fillets and let marinate for 20 minutes. Remove from the marinade and grill on a preheated grill or non-stick grill pan over medium high heat until cooked through, about 3 minutes per side. Let cool for 5 minutes before serving.



For the Chipotle Mayonnaise:

- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1 teaspoon chipotle adobo sauce
- 1 chipotle pepper (from can in adobo sauce)
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- Salt and pepper to taste

Add all chipotle mayonnaise ingredients to food processor or blender and blend until mixed thoroughly. Alternatively, mince the garlic and chipotle pepper and mix all ingredients together. Taste and adjust seasonings.

Assembly: Heat the tortillas on the grill or grill pan for 30 seconds on each side. Slice the avocados. Add half the chipotle mayonnaise to the shredded cabbage. Combine and add more as needed. Serve ingredients separately, or make tacos by putting fish in first, then avocado slices. Top with chipotle slaw and garnish with lime wedges.

Ron Karp's 25th Anniversary

Rachel Gardner served as deputy executive director and worked closely with Ron Karp for many years. Below are Rachel's reflections and recollections.

Ron is a true visionary and has been the heartbeat of Food For Thought for the past 25 years. He has both an excellent business sense and a kind and compassionate heart. Both have helped him successfully steer FFT in serving some of Sonoma County's most vulnerable residents during incredibly challenging times.

From the early days, working with Ron during the HIV/AIDS crisis, it was clear to me that he had the capacity to project not only what clients needed most on a personal level, but also what was necessary from an operational standpoint. He asks the right questions, listens, develops a plan and stays on course without losing sight of the difference FFT strives to make in people's lives.

When Ron joined the organization in 1996, it was struggling financially. He immediately prioritized raising funds to ensure the continued existence of the organization as well as the expansion of vital client services. Ron played an essential role in the capital funding campaign that financed the building of FFT's current Forestville facility and the surrounding organic gardens, which provide fresh produce for clients.

He also advocated for and led the agency's expansion of its mission to serve people living with other serious illnesses,

in addition to HIV. Ron has provided stable and thoughtful leadership by staying focused on the mission of providing excellent nutrition to people in Sonoma County affected by serious illnesses. What impresses me most about Ron is his deep sense of integrity. He leads with his heart but stays grounded to ensure that FFT remains viable and relevant by feeding our most underserved neighbors. He motivates others to put their best efforts forth by promoting teamwork.

Ron is passionate about reducing food insecurity and improving health outcomes through proper nutrition. He has dedicated his life's work to this cause. Ron is a founding member of the California Food Is Medicine Coalition and has also served on the boards of the Association of Nutrition Service Agencies and the Sonoma County Commission on AIDS. Food For Thought is now recognized as one of the most important service providers of food and nutrition services to critically ill individuals in Sonoma County.



Rachel Gardner and Ron Karp at FFT's Calabash event in 2012

It is not at all surprising to me that with Ron at the helm, when the pandemic hit in 2020, FFT was able not only to continue serve its existing clients, but also to expand and provide nutrition to thousands of COVID-19 patients. Ron's efforts have made a difference in the lives of so many seriously ill people in Sonoma County. I am proud to have served as his colleague and incredibly grateful to be his friend.

What is Food Medicine?

The concept of food as medicine is becoming increasingly popular with media and health care providers. You may have heard it referenced on the news, social media or even at the doctor's office, but what does "food is medicine" really mean?

The food is medicine movement grew out of a grassroots effort to provide food to people living with HIV/AIDS during the early days of the AIDS epidemic. In the late 1980s and early 90s, Food For Thought and other forward-thinking nonprofit organizations began to pop up across the country to provide lifesaving food to our neighbors in need. Over the years, these same nonprofit organizations began to expand, using their expertise to provide nutritious food to people living with other serious illnesses, and in 2010 they formed the Food is Medicine Coalition (FIMC) to further define and expand access to medical nutrition services.

"In the early days of the AIDS crisis, the focus was just on providing people with enough food to keep them alive," said Ron Karp, FFT's executive director. "But as the medications used to treat HIV improved and people began living longer, we and other agencies shifted our focus from basic care to comprehensive services and medically tailored groceries and meals. We found that eating healthy food had a positive impact on our clients' overall health."

The food is medicine movement recognizes that certain foods contribute to the development of chronic illnesses, and that proper nutrition can greatly improve health outcomes, reduce the side effects of some medications, and in some cases, reverse the course of disease. In 2014, FFT expanded its eligibility and now provides healthy food to thousands of Sonoma County residents affected by a range of conditions that can be managed or improved through nutrition.

Positive Health Outcomes

FFT is one of the founding members of the California Food Is Medicine Coalition (CalFIMC), an association of community-based nonprofit organizations providing medically-tailored nutrition services in California. One of the goals of this coalition is to demonstrate the impact that our nutrition services have on clinical health outcomes and reduced health care costs.



In Sonoma County, FFT has shown that our medically tailored groceries and meals greatly improve the health and wellness of our clients. In addition to medically tailored grocery orders and/or meals designed by a registered dietitian, clients receive consistent wellness check-ins with FFT's client services staff.

This nutrition support is often a game changer for clients living with chronic illness. In 2017, the agency collaborated with West County Health Centers to closely monitor patients after receiving three months of a comprehensive nutrition intervention. The results revealed that clients experienced the following changes after receiving services:

- 38% increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables
- 24% decrease in hospital visits
- 12.69% drop in average LDL (cholesterol)
- 77% decrease in loneliness and isolation
- .26 drop in average A1C (blood sugar)

"I have seen firsthand the significant nutrition needs on the part of many of our high-risk patients," said Mary Szczey, former executive director of West County Health Centers. "We serve hundreds of food insecure, low-income patients...Some of these patients have the highest rates of utilization in our system, and my staff and I are pleased to be able to refer some of them to Food For Thought...I strongly believe that Food For Thought is the best group to provide comprehensive nutrition services to the critically ill in Sonoma County."

Getting the Word Out: FFT's Advocacy Efforts

In addition to providing lifesaving nutrition services, FFT is a vocal advocate for equitable access to healthy food for our neighbors living with serious medical conditions. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of FFT and our CalFIMC partners, we are finally starting to see changes in health care policy to fund and promote food is medicine interventions in California. We are also pleased to share that Medicare and MediCal are now beginning to include medically tailored nutrition in their programs.

While this is exciting progress, our work is far from over. FFT and CalFIMC are working hard to ensure that the adoption of medically tailored nutrition services in health care is community-based and equitable. At the state level, the California Department of Health Care Services will roll out a new initiative in 2022 called California Advancing and Innovating MediCal to expand services to include access to medically tailored nutrition and other non-clinical services to address social determinants of health and improve health outcomes.

Locally, FFT continues to make outreach to elected officials and health care entities to advocate for nutrition services as a successful intervention for people living with serious medical conditions. Our vision is a Sonoma County where everyone with a medical need has access to nutritious food to heal and thrive.



FFT's Executive Director Ron Karp and Director of Community Engagement Helen Myers at a Hill Day in Washington D.C. during a Food Is Medicine Coalition Symposium

Save The Date • Thursday December 2, 2021 • Dine Out. Take Out.



Dining Out For Life® is an annual dining event that raises funds and awareness for people living with HIV. Be a part of the movement and help Food For Thought make this year's event a success! For businesses that want to sponsor the event, or for individuals that want to volunteer, contact us. Otherwise, simply save the date and plan to support local restaurants and enjoy some delicious meals in Sonoma County on December 2!

For more information, visit FFTfoodbank.org/dining-out-for-life

Questions? Contact Kristen Power at KristenP@FFTfoodbank.org, (707) 887-1647 ext. 126.

Food For Thought's mission is to foster health and healing with food and compassion.

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