

HOST LEDE: As more and more Californians get older and retire, there is a growing pool of people with time and skills that community organizations could put to work. But seniors here have a relatively low volunteer rate, and often feel isolated.

A 77-year old San Francisco man has found a way to stay involved. He forgets about his arthritis and his cane to do what he loves best: cook for his community. As part of our “Graying California” series, KQED’s Farida Jhabvala Romero has this story.

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AMBI Kitchen sounds, cutting sounds

In his small kitchen, Emam Saber holds a butcher knife and trims one of the 30 New York steaks he’s laid out on a cutting board.

EMAM: All my work here is for charity. I didn’t charge anything and I pay every penny of my own money.

That’s his \$660 dollar social security check, and money his wife Hewida earns from running a daycare out of their apartment in San Francisco.

AMBI Child’s voice -- What is that? - Look! (goes under)

In the kitchen -- next to the living room where the kids are -- Emam’s got two pans on the stove.

AMBI Sizzling steaks

He says the oil has to be smoking hot before putting the meat on.

EMAM: It seals the flavor but if you put the stake and it’s not hot, all the juice come down and you lose everything.

Emam worked for decades as a chef at fancy hotels and a french restaurant. Even now that he’s retired, and has arthritis, he loves to cook.

REPORTER: Why do you like it?

EMAM: Because I like to eat good (laughs)

Growing up in Cairo, Egypt, he was one of 19 kids. He remembers watching his mother cook *big* meals with neighbors to share. He says in those days, men weren't allowed in the kitchen.

EMAM: Only the ladies. But I was the only one that break the rule because from seven years old I start talk I love cooking and I couldn't stop resisting that.

Emam came to San Francisco in 1969. He's lived in the same flat ever since, recreating that bustling family feel from his childhood.

For him, community is number one.

EMAM: God created us to be around each other, to be human to each other. And that's why you enjoy the life.

For decades Emam has cooked for people at mosques, schools and nonprofits. He's the guy that volunteers to bring food for Ramadan, a baby shower, or the Christmas party at St. Anthony's -- an organization that feeds the homeless.

LYDIA: What sticks with me the most when I think about Emam is his generosity and joyful spirit.

Lydia Bransten works at St Anthony's. She says Emam made for years a delicious middle eastern banquet of chicken, rice with almonds, and a polenta dessert with rose water and honey.

LYDIA: He brings to his cooking and his meals this love of community and this this sense of that through sharing a meal with another human being that you build relationship and it's those relationships that keep us together in the end.

AMBI kitchen

Back at Emam's flat, dinner is finally ready. He lays the cooked steaks on beds of rice.

EMAM: I'm always busy, 50 years here and never stop.

He covers the trays with foil, and gets ready to deliver them.

AMBI foil sound in kitchen

EMAM: That's it! Now we go! A nananana

He says goodbye to the kids in the living room, who just woke up from their nap.

KIDS: (laughter) Bye! Bye Bye !

A man of purpose. On his way. To feed the people.

EMAM: Bye! Bye!

In San Francisco, I'm Farida Jhabvala Romero.

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