

All the News Worth
Chirping About from
Villa Esperanza Services
Fall 2023 Newsletter



Providing Love, Care
and Hope for Individuals
with Intellectual/
Developmental Disabilities
and their Families since 1961



Manna and Villa crew outside the food bank: (left to right) John (job coach), Mike, Biff, Aaron, and Edgar (Manna Staff member).

Meet The Manna Food Bank and Villa Superhero Family!

Article By Jordan Paggett, Villa Esperanza Services Community Engagement Coordinator

You may have seen one of Villa's participants the other day when you were shopping at Vons. Or you could have had a meal at a restaurant where a Villa participant was washing dishes. Or one of them could have helped you check out at Home Depot. In today's day and age, it is a wonderful experience to have individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities welcomed and included in our community.

It wasn't always this way. When Villa was founded in 1961, individuals with special needs were pushed to the sidelines and excluded from society. Thankfully, the parents who founded Villa had a vision of their children with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and others like them, being productive and integral members of society. This group of visionary parents believed their neurodivergent children deserved quality care, education, and inclusion within the community. Today, Villa is helping make that dream a reality. But we couldn't do it without like-minded organizations and community partners that help give our participants places to work and volunteer.

In Ventura County, Villa is lucky to have a longtime collaboration with an exceptional community partner: the Manna Conejo Valley Food Bank. Manna provides food for low-income families in the Conejo Valley area. Founded in 1971, they've dedicated over 50 years to their mission: "To feed hungry people in the Conejo Valley." For the last 15 years, Villa and Manna have collaborated through jobs for our participants. This remarkable partnership has been an unwavering source of support and gratitude for all those involved.

Working together, Manna and Villa have cultivated a deep sense of belonging and purpose for Villa's adults with

special needs. The enthusiastic participants from Villa's West Region Employment Program, which is based out of Thousand Oaks, wholeheartedly contribute to the food bank in various ways. Utilizing their impressive organizational skills, they assist in sorting and stocking donations, while also maintaining the cleanliness of the Manna facility throughout the day.



Front row (left to right) Biff, Jennifer, Leanne, Michael G., Aaron, Kelly, and Michael B. Back row (left to right) Lisa, Edgar, John at West Region's 2023 Annual Achievement Awards.

Manna operates with a small staff and relies on a large team of many wonderful volunteers to help them sort donated food and organize food drives. However, they operate their main day-to-day operations by employing a team of three Villa Employment participants: Biff, Michael and Aaron, accompanied by their dedicated Job Coach, John. John shared, "Working with this group has made me not only a better job coach but also a better person." Together they embark on their mission in their Villa truck to pick up local food donations. No perishable item escapes their discerning eyes, ensuring only the freshest supplies grace the shelves. Moreover, their infectious personalities serve as their true superpower.

Speaking of superpowers, Edgar, a Villa job coach for a decade and now a Manna employee reveals how they all adopted superhero alter egos to boost morale when they started. And guess what? Those nicknames have stuck around! So, we have Batman, Wolverine, Captain America, Green Lantern, and even Shazam! This working crew is not just ordinary professionals, they are a league of extraordinary individuals on a mission to empower and inspire one unperishable food item at a time!

The connection between Manna and Villa is a special

one, having been forged through many years of teamwork. "I like this crew and they are really cool. I love everything about my job!" Biff exclaimed. Manna and Villa were able to navigate together through some times of great difficulties by working as a team unit. Lisa Degagne, Villa Employment Services Supervisor explained, "Throughout 2020, during the pandemic, many of our community partners had to understandably stop collaborating with our participants. But with Manna's support, we were able to keep one of Villa's Employment groups employed throughout the pandemic, which meant so much to our participants. Additionally, through our partnership, Manna could continue to provide food to those in need in our community."

In August, Villa honored Manna with the Community Partnership Award at Villa's West Region Annual Achievement Awards. It was a fantastic chance to celebrate Manna as well as Villa's participants, who all received individual awards for their hard work and dedication to their goals.

"I like this crew and they are really cool. I love everything about my job!"

Over the years, Villa has seen the remarkable journey of Manna, witnessing their notable achievements, growth, and triumphs. Manna was even honored with the prestigious title of Conejo Valley's Non-Profit of the Year in 2023. One of their most extraordinary endeavors was the ambitious project of revamping an old church, the Shepherd's House Church. This structure was transformed into a magnificent three-story warehouse, equipped with larger freezers and refrigerators and a larger pantry. The architects managed to preserve some of the church's unique architectural features, such as the steeple, the grand wooden beams, and the beautiful stained glass windows.

It's truly awe-inspiring to see how Manna has breathed new life into the space and continues to provide a safe haven in the Conejo Valley, surrounding areas to the community, and to our Villa family. "We're going to keep the crew together. Villa and Manna are family now!" Edgar declares enthusiastically. On that, we agree, and Villa is grateful to have such a wonderful collaborator and partner in Manna.

The Instrumental Power of Music Therapy!

Article By Kimberly Francis, Villa Esperanza Services Philanthropy Coordinator

In the heart of Pasadena, a symphony of hope and harmony has been reignited. Music therapy has long been a valuable addition to Villa's programs. When the pandemic hit, in-person music therapy had to be paused. But now, it has made a triumphant return to Villa thanks to some wonderful generous musicians.

Erika Walczak, a dedicated teacher from the Pasadena Conservatory of Music (PCM), has been weaving melodies of exploration through education and the profound impact of music for over two decades. "My favorite part of teaching is witnessing the self-discovery and confidence that arise as people develop musical skills," Erika commented.

Erika's brother, Gregory Walczak, is part of Villa's Independent Living Skills Program. Gregory is also an avid musician, and his passion encouraged Erika and the PCM team to begin playing instrumental concerts for Villa's residents. "Gregory is a skilled and knowledgeable pianist and composer. His expertise and knowledge of classical music has helped amplify our performances at Villa," Erika shared. "Gregory is an integral member of the ensemble and has participated as a pianist in several performances."

Witnessing the profound impact of these performances on Villa's adult participants, Erika extended their musical presentations to Villa's students. Embracing the success of participatory elements such as colored scarves and free-spirited movement, the PCM team brought the same enchantment to their younger audience. Their performances at Villa are more than just musical events; they are moments of pure magic. During Hispanic Heritage Month, they delved into music from South America. "Mr. David, a Villa School aide brought his charanga and played 'La Mariposa,' a Bolivian song filled with lively participation elements," Erika recounted. "The students did so beautifully and radiated joy!"

Another person spreading joy through music is Marina Maiztegui, a music therapist from Rhythm & Truth. "Music therapists use music to reach non-musical objectives like communication and behavior goals," Marina explained. "The connections forged between speech and singing, rhythm and motor behavior, and more, have all been proven to optimize a student's ability to learn and interact." Therapists employ various techniques, including active music making, movement and dance, and mindful listening.

Since Marina began music therapy sessions at Villa, the results have been nothing short of transformative. "I have witnessed so much joy and connection among participants and staff," Marina shared. "There is something about seeing these wonderful children smiling, engaging, connecting, and growing through music. That intuitive bond a child has with music is not something that needs to be taught. It is pure; it is joy; it has no exceptions, and that is truly priceless."

The return of music therapy to Villa has been met with open arms and joyful hearts. We are grateful to the Pasadena Conservatory of Music, Rhythm & Truth, and our esteemed grant funders, Pasadena Showcase House for the Arts and San Marino Women's Club, for bringing music back to the Villa programs. Thank you for being instrumental in nurturing joy throughout our community, and giving our Villa participants opportunities for growth and harmony through the universal language of music.



Marina (right) engaging with Ethan, a Villa School student during music therapy.

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VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES

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VILLA CHEFS CHOCOLATE ZUCCHINI BREAD

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup flour
- 1/2 cup cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup oil
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/4 cup chocolate chips
- 1 1/2 cups zucchini (shredded)

DIRECTIONS:

1. In a small bowl add flour, cocoa powder, baking soda, and salt. Whisk ingredients together.
2. In a large bowl add eggs, oil, vanilla, and brown sugar. Stir ingredients together.
3. Add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients.
4. Add the zucchini (shredded).
5. Add chocolate chips.
6. Pour batter into greased pan.
7. Add chocolate chips to the top.
8. Bake for 50 minutes.



The Behavior Team and Occupational Therapy Team collaborated to create Villa Chefs. Villa Chefs consists of several students who learn to bake wonderful treats here on campus. This month Students Mona, Jasper, David, and Stephanie baked Chocolate Zucchini Bread and it was a huge success! Through this new program, students will work on meal preparation, safety awareness, motor coordination, sequencing, and self-regulation skills.