Wildflowers Institute Addresses Food Insecurity in the Tenderloin

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Following our survey of over 1,000 Chinese elders, Wildflowers Institute's focus is now on using the data to enhance relationships within extended families, social circles, neighborhoods, and spiritual communities, aiming to improve their overall effectiveness and connection. These relationships are primarily what makes life worth living for residents in San Francisco's Tenderloin. In addition, the California Department of Social Services has proposed eliminating funding for certain CalFresh initiatives, such as the CalFresh Minimum Nutrition Benefit Pilot program and the Work Incentive Nutritional Supplement (WINS) Program, starting in the 2025–26 fiscal year. These proposed cuts are affecting the level of assistance available to CalFresh recipients in San Francisco. Moreover, the Tenderloin neighborhood lacks a full-service grocery store, making access to affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food difficult for its 30,000 residents, including 3,500 children.

At the beginning of 2025, Wildflowers Institute started training a group of eleven elders known locally as the Radiant Lights of the Setting Suns in our process to make visible the hidden treasures of their community, and to apply these resources to solving problems in their community. The Radiant Lights are deeply concerned about food insecurity among families and in the neighborhood overall. In response to the crisis, the group plans to reduce the cost for fresh Asian produce, meats, seafood, and rice by organizing an association that brings food directly from farms and the sea to the kitchen table. Their overall goal is to contribute to deepening the love in the family and among neighbors while making fresh food more affordable and delicious.

The grandmothers come from diverse backgrounds and have been working side by side, solving problems, learning from one another, and sharing experiences, thus heightening their vitality and creativity. Together, we have been exploring how to strengthen the family and the community during times of duress. And what we've landed on is the customary practice of planning and cooking family meals as an expression of supreme acts of love. The elders shared with us the immense joy they feel when they see their children and grandchildren feast delightfully on the dishes they make.



EntitledFrom My Heart, the project entails a threefold approach. First, the elders are documenting and organizing traditional food recipes from different regions and provinces in China passed down from generation to generation. The elders are reaching out to grandmothers and grandfathers in twelve residential buildings to identify family recipes and resource people who love cooking and are competent in the kitchen. Second, the collection of legacy recipes will be compiled into a book to be published in Chinese and English and shared widely. The book of recipes will be a tool for others to use to expand their cooking portfolio. Third, the elders will raise additional funds by making affordable and delicious meals based on traditional family recipes in pop-ups at local restaurants and communal kitchens.

With the assistance of Wildflowers Institute, the Radiant Lights are building on the tried-and-true tradition of integrating family and food. They are leveraging what already works. The Radiant Lights and their project, From My Heart, are hidden gems of the Tenderloin.