The Mirror and The Lens

November 19, 2025

In early October 2025, Wildflowers Institute undertook production of a video to dive deeper into the importance of food in the Chinese culture and the initiation of a Flow Funding Circle in the Tenderloin. The discoveries Wildflowers made in the process were truly remarkable. The video, titled “Uniting at the Kitchen Table,” is linked below.

The Mirror: The idea of holding up a mirror to society is simply about revealing reality so people can see their strengths more clearly. In the making of this video, we filmed a group of community elders the institute had invited to work together in a circle as Flow Funders. In the video, we see them in several situations of everyday life that all revolve around food: shopping, cooking, and sharing a meal. Unselfconscious about their actions, the elders are shown going about their ways of being together. What the video mirrors is the underlying food culture and the rituals that innately guide these elders in their associations around food. Making visible this previously unseen asset, guides the elders in reflecting on the importance of food as the keeper of the culture in community sustainability.

Family Nights Together

The first community supper (Family Nights Together), provided by a new partnership with SF-based FOOD Friends, was the result of a group of community elders coming together to form a Flow Funding Circle.



Flow Funding was developed by Marion Weber as a way of giving direct gifts to community projects. Traditional forms of philanthropy use a top-down, outside-in approach to funding, but Flow Funding works from the bottom up, from within the community. In this case, the virtue and wisdom of the elders inspired three food-based programs rooted solely in the community’s ecosystem. The exponential synergy that will emerge from this effort is nothing short of 1 + 2 + 3 = 12. We imagine that the eventual pride felt by these elders will be substantial when they see their roles and their relationships reflect a power that is sustaining their community.

The Lens: When we think about looking at the world through a particular "lens," it's like applying a filter, framework, or perspective to help make sense of the world. The eight-minute video features interviews with Malcolm Yeung of the Chinatown Community Development Center, Todd Breyfogle of the Aspen Institute, Lisa Spinali of Lisa Spinali Consulting and Hanmin Liu of Wildflowers Institute. They each have their own lens, or perspective, on the narrative.



On the importance of gathering around food for cultural sustainability, Todd Breyfogle sees that, "…the opportunities of coming together around food, to share wisdom—to be in communion with one another—allows us to think critically and creatively about the challenges that we face."

The story opens with a brief history of Chinese immigration to San Francisco, explores the importance of food as a central and unifying element in the Chinese culture, and highlights the power of community elders as effective activists. In the words of Malcolm Yeung, "Seniors are the most powerful activists … because where they are in life motivates them to seek and foster community." As Todd Breyfogle notes on the discovery of elders as a motivated Flow Funding Circle, "This is ground-up theorizing, and then a conceptualization that allows the communities to flourish rather than a sense of bending the community in one direction or another." And Lisa Spinali notes, "This community has a lot of assets, a lot of power. [As philanthropists] how do we help them help themselves.?" These insights further illuminate a core tenant of our process which is that discovering the unseen treasures in communities (and supporting them) strengthens their will and capacities.



Click on the image above to view video "Uniting at the Kitchen Table."

The metaphors of the mirror and the lens were not something we had consciously planned for at the outset of drafting this newsletter. Nor were they meant to provide a clever turn of phrase. They were inspired by what we've experienced. As we moved through the physical documentary process—planning, shooting, and completing the video—the stories mirrored back to us, analyzed through the lenses of respected collaborators, provided concrete insight into how our strategies are truly benefiting the communities we serve. In this case, a group of elders has spearheaded food-based initiatives that will go to the heart of strengthening individual and familial bonds within the Tenderloin's Chinese community. And although this particular community is one small example, a "microcosm" as Todd Breyfogle points out, the methodology and impact of ground-up initiatives like this are transferable and scalable.