Cackles, Cauldrons, and Carrots

Lori Cannon Feeds Chicago

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Sometimes it’s the hair -- a bright-red teased bouffant with a carrot-orange accent. And sometimes it’s the laugh -- a sort of cross between a hearty chuckle and the high-pitched greeting of Flipper the dolphin. But always the first thing a visitor to Grocery Land in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood notices is Lori Cannon.

Founder, confidante, mother hen, friend in need -- it was Cannon’s vision that got Open Hand Chicago, a meals-on-wheels type of organization for people living with HIV, rolling in 1988. And it was her indefatigable energy and her sense of how to predict and serve shifting needs that made the organization a national model for direct service to the HIV community.

Hardly the typical image of a social-services facility, Grocery Land is part living room, part open-shelved pantry. Some 450 visitors a week come to select two bags of groceries each, chat with volunteer “shoppers,” check in with a dietitian and share the lowdown with Lori.

“PWAs spend enough time sitting in doctors’ offices, waiting rooms, bureaucrats’ cubicles. We wanted to make a space where they would feel at home,” Cannon says. To that end, she enlisted her friends designer Victor Salvo and artist David Lee Csicsko to create an environment that’s like dropping in at a good friend’s house. "Some people say it’s like *playing* house,“ Cannon laughs. ”We’ve got everything here but the E-Z Bake Oven."

Cannon’s good humor belies her reputation as one of Chicago’s fiercest AIDS activists. Like most who have been on the front line of the epidemic, Cannon came into her work sideways. A fixture in the ’70s and early ’80s on both the gay-club and the blues-music scenes (she was known then as “the Czarina of the Underworld” and is still essential to the entourage of B.B. King when the music legend comes through town), Cannon drove a school bus by day and chauffeured entertainers at night. The loss of a friend to AIDS 10 years ago prompted her to volunteer at Chicago House, a residence for PWAs.

As others fell ill, her commitment of time and energy grew. With her best friend, the late political cartoonist Danny Sotomayor, she played a major role in ACT UP/Chicago. “People turned to me to plot demos,” she says. “I’ve been getting arrested in Chicago since 1968, and let me tell you, when this girl goes limp, four cops are taken out of commission.”

She helped organize Open Hand as a meals-on-wheels program in 1988. She had no trouble attracting the initial volunteers, but she works assiduously to cultivate and support them and their successors, some 650 today. “I don’t like to have the attention focused on me,” Cannon says. “The volunteers are the heart and soul of the organization.” Her contacts in the theater and entertainment worlds keep workers and clients supplied with complimentary tickets to shows and special events, and her volunteer-appreciation parties are packed.

Open Hand and its volunteers have delivered more than one million meals yearly on a budget of nearly $2 million. But several years ago, Cannon began noticing that once personal contact and support had been established, many clients were ready for a greater degree of independence. Starting with a pantry on the city’s west side three years ago, Cannon has launched three full-service grocery centers throughout the city, two in predominantly Hispanic and African-American communities, with a fourth preparing to open. Now, 80 percent of Open Hand’s 2,000 clients use the grocery centers, and only 200 receive home-delivered meals.

“We are always driven by the needs of the clients,” Cannon says. “Initially, many were isolated and afraid, so we had meals-on-wheels. Now they are taking greater control of their lives -- wanting to cook, wanting to shop, wanting the food and variety they choose -- so we have the grocery centers. As we’ve re-established a sense of community, the next step will be a series of monthly dinners where PWAs can go out for a fellowship meal, be served by volunteers and enjoy themselves.”

For Cannon, the 80-hour weeks with Open Hand are “an honor and a privilege. There is enough pain in this plague, and enough statistics. It seemed time to put a human face on all this. Unfortunately, the face is mine.” And then the laugh again. And it’s time to check in with another client.

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