



COMMUNITY BRIDGES
PUENTES DE LA COMUNIDAD

COMMUNITY BRIDGES 40TH ANNIVERSARY

A CONVERSATION WITH SAM KARP

Food and Nutrition Services Executive Director, 1978-1987



Sam Karp speaking at a rally, June 1978

What does it look like to effect positive, local change that meets the needs of an ever-changing community?

During his 10 years with Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) and what is now Community Bridges, Sam Karp lead the agency through waves of advocacy, activism, and the launching of new programs and services. To Karp, his work as Executive Director wasn't merely about meeting community needs; it was about delivering high-quality services, a value that has stuck with Community Bridges for 40 years.



Sam Karp at a volunteer appreciation event, 1983

Karp quips that in the 1970s, he was “a community organizer that somehow got lost in a world of goat husbandry.” Prior to becoming Executive Director of FNS, Karp had spent many years as a civil rights and anti-war activist, worked in a law office in New York City, owned and operated a commercial goat dairy, and led the UCSC-sponsored University Services Agency, a collection of 17 nonprofit alternative businesses.

At 30, Karp stepped into his role as executive director, and was immediately thrust into a political environment with the passage of Proposition 13: **one that required engagement in the county budget process and a commitment to defending the human service needs of the Santa Cruz community.**

Karp played a leadership role in 70s Santa Cruz, as the community began to evolve into the politically progressive community we know today. Many UCSC students were choosing to stay in town after graduation and become engaged in their neighborhoods and local politics. Simultaneously, Santa Cruz was a major retirement hotspot and had attracted a growing gay and lesbian community. **Amidst these community-wide changes, Karp and many others worked collaboratively to see a more progressive Santa Cruz emerge—one with diverse groups of people facing unique challenges and needs.**

The world according to Karp

Student radical adopts bureaucratic trappings

By STEVE SHENKOFF
For Sam Karp, bureaucracy is just an extension of social activism by other means. The controversial, 37-year-old director of Food and Nutrition Services in an unconstructed nose of the 1960s antiwar movement. Times have changed since the late '60s, when Karp's travels around the country as an organizer for Students for a Democratic Society, but Sam Karp hasn't really changed; he's just toned down his act.

His face framed by a tightly trimmed beard and wreathed in untidy brown curls, Karp still looks the part of a '60s "radical." And when he begins to talk about the agency he has directed and nurtured and headed for the last five years, it's clear that he's never really strayed from his anti-war activist roots.

The "ultimate goal" of FNS, Karp asserts, is nothing less than the "elimination of hunger, malnutrition and poverty." And that, he said, involves more than simply putting butter, cheese and other government surplus commodities in the hands of the elderly and the poor. "Our belief," he explained, "is that hunger is a political problem — not a problem of ignorance or contact, but one of unequal distribution of money and food in our society."

Political problems, Karp said, require political solutions, and so FNS is in the forefront of what he likes to call "radicalism" — pressuring the public and lobbying elected officials "to change the root causes of poverty and to work for social change."

Back in 1968, Sam Karp was merely trying to end a war. Karp grew up in Alliquippa, Penn., a small town on the banks of the Ohio River. "The most exciting thing in town," he recalled, "was watching the catfish jump every summer when the polluted river caught fire."

His home town, Karp said, was dominated by the Jones & Laughlin Steel Co. "It was a company town, with a company store."

In the fall of 1965, as Lyndon Johnson vowed never to send "our boys" to Vietnam, Karp went off to Washington and Jefferson College in western Pennsylvania, where he majored in political science and set his sights on a legal career.

Two years later, while attending a summer course in political thought at Harvard University, Karp found himself caught up in civil rights work and the nascent antiwar movement. It was at the involvement that was to change his life.

When he graduated from Washington and Jefferson in 1969, Karp, who enrolled in ROTC in college, went into the Army's six-month active reserve program — as an enlisted man. He enlisted, he said, for the "purpose of organizing against the war."

Organize, he did. At Fort Dix, N.J., Karp helped put out an anti-war, "underground" newspaper and was part of a group which opened an off-post canteen, where much of the fare was anti-war polemics.

Shortly after the first issue of the underground paper made its appearance — Karp said 20,000 copies were distributed to soldiers at airports and bus terminals — Karp was attached to a reserve unit in Newark where, unaccountably, his readjustment was to talk to new recruits at Fort Dix. "So I would go to Fort Dix," Karp recalled, "I don't know how they assigned me that job, and I would tell the recruits to come to the coffee-



Photo by Kurt Ellison

'Hunger' according to Sam Karp, is a political problem.
Karp and bear Pete Steger and Arlo Gutierrez and talk to counselors (returned Vietnam vets) about the war.

During the 18 months the coffeehouse was open, Karp said, he and his cohorts "were harassed constantly by the FBI; we had problems with the New Jersey State Police, the local police."

"I was arrested five or six times for going through stop signs that didn't exist and for being in the state for illegal purposes."

The last case, Karp said, was appealed all the way to the New Jersey Supreme Court, which ruled the state's vagrancy law unconstitutional.

In 1969, Karp went to work for the SDS central office in Chicago, where he continued his anti-war work. For a year and a half he commuted between Chicago and Detroit doing organizational work and also visited SDS chapters around the country.

He was arrested once more — on a charge of aggravated assault on a police officer — during the Weathermen-happened "Days of Rage" demonstrations in Chicago. The judge who sentenced him (Sol Epton, brother of recently defeated Chicago mayoral candidate Bernard Epton) gave Karp the stiffest sentence the law allowed — six months in Cook County jail and five years probation.

Karp, who made a brief visit to California before his sentencing, asked Epton to let him serve out his probation here. But the judge told him there were "too many radicals" on the West Coast and ordered him to do his probation in Chicago and serve time in jail.

After his release from jail, Karp worked as a clerk in a criminal law office in New York City, succeeding after a year in having his probation transferred to California. He moved to San Francisco, where he stayed for six months before

settling in Santa Cruz County in January, 1971. "I wanted to get into a more rural setting and work with my hands," Karp said. He moved to the Kananon ranch on Freedom Boulevard, where he acquired "a couple of cattle, some sheep, pigs and a goat." Eventually he acquired more goats — 100 — and moved to Los Gatos Highway, where, for the next five years, he operated the Tetraide goat dairy.

With the help of five employees, Karp distributed his goat milk to 17 stores around the county, made deliveries to 45 homes, and, once a week, to the California Goat Dairy Association, a Turlock co-op. Sam Karp had become a capitalist.

Karp decided to bail out of the dairy business after losing his first vacation in five years and returning home to "100 pregnant goats." He sold the dairy and took a job as administrator for University Services Agency, parent agency of a Santa Cruz food and hardware coop which he co-managed.

In April 1978, Karp succeeded Al Dibdivice as head of Food and Nutrition Services. Over the six years since FNS' founding in 1972, Dibdivice had built the agency, which began as a breakfast program for children, serving 50 meals a day, into a \$1 million-a-year operation. Karp was to expand it even more.

Today Karp oversees a small empire in Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. FNS employs 110 year-round workers at its central administrative offices in Aptos and in a plethora of programs scattered from Santa Cruz to Hollister. The FNS organizational chart, with its "family services division," "career services division," "transportation services division," and "central administration" divisions, each with its own subsidiary programs and subdivisions, reads like a guide to a state or county agency.

Food and Nutrition Service's 1982-83 cash budget totals \$13 million. An additional \$4.5 million in pass-through funds (money funneled through FNS for other programs), and U.S. Department of Agriculture food shipments totaling \$1.1 million, will bring the agency's total budget to nearly \$11 million this fiscal year.

Karp is proud of the way FNS has grown over its five-year tenure as the agency's top administrator. "We've more than tripled in size and added a lot of new programs," he said. "Each year we've increased the agency's total number of the largest businesses in Santa Cruz County."

"We're a large employer and we put a lot of money into the local economy," he said.

FNS, Karp said, pays its "line staff" wages "comparable to market equity." But its administrative jobs, he said, are relatively low-paying. "We have a strong belief in spending funds on direct services," explained Karp, who earns \$21,000 annually as FNS' chief executive officer.

Karp sees nothing incongruous about an agency "be" "bureaucratic" serving as the head of a quasi-public bureaucracy with a multi-million-dollar budget, however, he says, FNS is a bureaucracy with a difference. "Bureaucracies are necessary — because of industrialization," he said. But, he insisted, "there's a real clear line that separates us from your normal conception of a bureaucracy: Our advocacy; our interest in social change; our interest in social justice."

"There's a real human element here, of dedication to social justice."

It's that dedication, Karp asserts, that has kept FNS fiscally robust at a time when other social service agencies have been forced to absorb serious cut-backs. "Human needs are growing, and the work of our organization is to meet those needs," he said. "We've adopted the posture that we're not going to make cuts (and) we put the full resources of our organization on the line each year to make sure services are not going to get cut."

"We're willing to fight to see social justice," Karp said. "Most bureaucracies aren't," he said. "They roll with the punches."

"We don't roll very well," said Karp. "That shouldn't be surprising. Rolling with the punches is something Sam Karp has never done well."

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
December, 1983

A 1983 profile on Sam Karp published in the Register-Pajaronian

A mix of passion, delivery of impactful services and activism fueled Karp's work. "That, and a deep commitment to community—a community where many of us were beginning to raise our children," Karp adds. "We cared about the quality of life, and part of that quality, in any community, is ensuring that those who are most vulnerable are taken care of and given access to opportunities. And so, it was in the spirit of community that we all felt obligated to build and support a robust community-based service delivery network."

“We’re willing
to **fight** to see
social justice.”

SAM KARP, 1983

One of Karp’s favorite memories is from 1983, when FNS was facing major cuts to its elderly nutrition program. **Prepped with oxygen tanks and joined by local reporters and a member of the Board of Supervisors, Karp took six busloads of seniors to Sacramento, where they occupied the Department of Aging building for several hours.**

“It was like a sneak attack,” Karp recalls. “We just walked in, unannounced, and seniors occupied the desks of department staff who were out to lunch. We brought in meals and said we weren’t leaving until the department reversed the funding decision.”








Sam Karp takes six busloads of seniors to Sacramento to demand funding from the Department of Aging, August 1983

Karp made a call from a pay phone to the governor's policy director, explaining that his crew of seniors wouldn't leave until they received a commitment to restore the \$336,000 in funding that had been cut. It took all day, but sure enough, the program received that commitment.

SAM KARP'S
FOUR-POINT
MANTRA | DEEPEN
RELATIONSHIPS

TELL PEOPLE'S
STORIES | ENGAGE IN
PUBLIC
POLICY

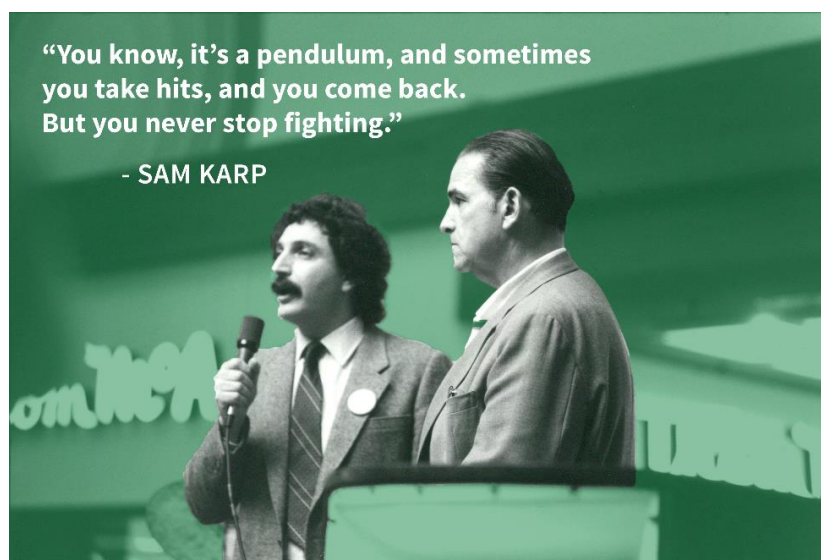
BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

 COMMUNITY BRIDGES
PUENTES DE LA COMUNIDAD

CELEBRATING
40 YEARS

BUILDING BRIDGES
ELIMINATING BARRIERS

Karp stuck to a four-point mantra during his time with Food and Nutrition Services: first, to deepen relationships with the people being served; second, to be advocates for and with program participants, and use all platforms available to tell their stories; third, to be actively engaged in local, state and federal policy decisions; and finally, to be accountable and transparent in all program and financial operations and decisions. While Karp describes the process of winning success and support for human services as a “pendulum,” his work with FNS was a testament to the role that persistence and passion play in meeting these challenges.



Sam Karp with state senator Henry J. Mello

Karp expresses that today, he is still surprised there is such a significant need for human services in Santa Cruz County and elsewhere—that the problems our communities face are so seemingly intractable.

But continuing challenges have done nothing to dull Karp’s passion for bettering communities and fighting for quality of life. Following 17 years as Vice President of the California HealthCare Foundation and now three years into retirement, Karp resides in Menlo Park and serves on the board of Families USA, a national health policy consumer advocacy organization.



(from left to right) Former Congressman Leon Panetta, Majel Jordan, Lillian Wilder, Sam Karp, and former County Supervisor Gary Patton at the 1982 Rock-a-Thon benefiting Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County



Sam Karp with current CEO of Community Bridges Ray Cancino, 2017

Community Bridges turns 40 this year! We're celebrating our rich history by taking a look at the leaders who have defined our role as an organization, as well as imagining what it will look like to meet the needs of Santa Cruz County for 40 more years and beyond! Follow along by visiting our [Facebook page](#) and don't forget to reserve tickets for our second annual [Farm to Fork Gala Dinner!](#)

