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.
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.
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.”
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.
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.

“You know, it’s a pendulum, and sometimes you take hits, and you come back. But you never stop fighting.”

- SAM KARP

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
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!