

â??Just a people personâ?• has been handing out joy for years, getting back smiles at work and at a home for kids with serious illnesses.

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You may not be able to see it, but even covered by a Covid mask, Bobby Thomasâ??s smile lights up the meat counter he presides over at Andronicoâ??s Market. Day in and day out, the 6-foot-3-inch butcher is there with a kind word and helpful suggestions for his customers at the Inner Sunset store.



Bobby Thomas juggling sausages to entertain a young customer. (Photo by Judy Goddess)

Barry Oâ??Reillyâ??s two-year-old greets Bobby with laughter, â??Bobby, Bobby,â?• he shouts as they approach the meat counter, his little arms reaching out from the shopping cart in glee. Thomas obliges his young fan by juggling sausages, three at a time. â??Itâ??s the highlight of his week,â?• his dad said. â??Bobby is the hero of the neighborhood.â?•

Thomas pulls out all the stops on Easter, Halloween, Mothersâ?? Day, and Christmas. Ditching his white coat, Bobby the Butcher becomes â??Bobby the Bunnyâ?• in full rabbit costume. Heâ??s the only Andronicoâ??s worker who regularly â??dresses upâ?• for Easter. And he spreads that good cheer beyond the meat counter.

For the past 25 years, Bobby the Bunny has been appearing on Easter at The Family House, a home away from home for families of seriously ill children receiving treatment at the University of California

San Francisco Benioff Childrenâ??s Hospital. Thomas was invited by a customer who saw him in costume at Andronicoâ??s one Easter. (At that time, the Family House was on Irving Street and Second Avenue. Today, it is on Mission Bay Boulevard North, walking distance from the new hospital.)

An invite that changed everything

He accepted his customerâ??s invite and was immediately hooked, he said. â??Seeing the families and children and realizing how their life was shifting, itâ??s heartbreaking. I just want to help.â?• Thomas continued, â??In families with two working adults one has to quit their job. There are medical bills, often other children to care for. I want to help by bringing joy.â?•

Founded in 1981, the Nancy & Stephen Grand Family House is nonprofit providing free, temporary housing to families of children under treatment who live more than 50 miles from the hospital. Over the course of a year, some 4,000 families, many of them low-income, have been hosted, said CEO Alexandra Morgan.



Bobby the Bunny entertains the kids at Family House and hands out Easter baskets. (Photo courtesy of the Family House.)

But joy is not Thomasâ?? only contribution. For the past eight years, heâ??s also raised funds and collected new toys for the house. His â??Big 5-0 birthday,â?• held two years ago at the Folsom Street Foundry, raised $25,000 for Family House.

Some of his grocery customers have become donors. The Inner Sunset Park Neighborhood Association publicizes Thomasâ?? fundraising campaign in its newsletter. Lifelong friend Robert Dudum, owner of the Parnassus Heights Pharmacy, has donated Easter baskets full of toys for the last 20 years.

Thomas reaches out relentlessly to let people know about the Family House. After telling 7th graders at St. Anne School about it, students raised $3,000 for the program. He also recruited some of his friends. â??One puts on puppet shows, another teaches carpentry,â?• he said. â??They do what they can. I even got some of them involved in delivering furniture to a single mother in Hayward.â?•

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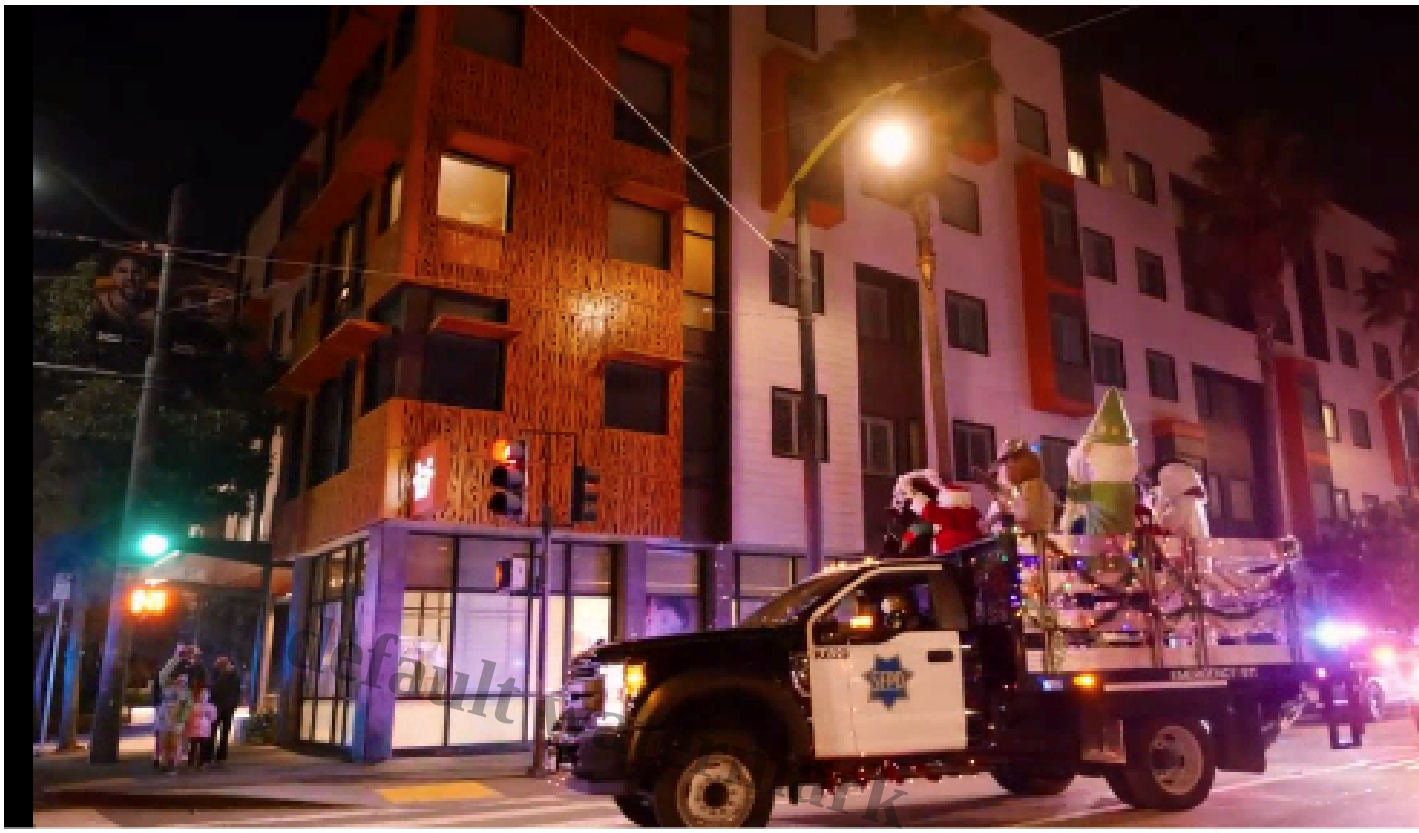
Thomas, the youngest of five children, was born and raised in San Francisco, and now lives alone several blocks from Andronicoâ??s Irving and Funston store. He attended Lincoln High, working after-school at the old Petriniâ??s Market at 25th & Irving. That job evolved into his current position at Andronicoâ??s. â??I learned butchering on the job and by attending classes at our union,â?• he said.

No one left out on the holidays

Before the pandemic, when close contact was allowed, the children were able to touch Bobby the Bunny and he them. Easter celebration started with a special lunch, then staff gathered the families in a long line and marched them outside to the courtyard where Bobby the Bunny danced, handed out Dudumâ??s Easter baskets, then led the children on an Easter egg hunt.

Outside the house, firemen gathered in their trucks while policemen wandered through the crowd. â??I wanted to blow their minds. I wanted them to know that even though they were in the hospital, they could still celebrate Easter.â?•

The pandemic greatly limited in-person involvement, but it takes more than that to keep this Easter bunny away. A week before Christmas 2020, Thomas realized he better organize some festivities for the kids. â??We still need to celebrate.â?• Bobby the Bunny is not limited to just one holiday.



Thomas corralled Santa, reindeer, elves and San Francisco Police Department officers to circle the Family House during Covid Christmas last year so the kids would know they werenâ??t forgotten. (Photo courtesy of the Family House.)



â??I want to help by bringing joyâ?• says Bobby Thomas. (Photo by Judy Goddess)

So, Thomas made some calls and got the police department to send 20 cars. Santa, reindeer, elves and, of course, Bobby the Bunny joined the parade. Lights and music accompanied the entourageâ??s multiple loops around the building. â??I wanted the children to know that Santa still comes to visit even though theyâ??re in the hospital and thereâ??s an epidemic.â?•

â??Family House loves Bobby and thank God that Bobby loves Family House,â?• said CEO Morgan. â??Bobby has a heart thatâ??s bigger than the outdoors, and he could rightfully claim his role in working daily on equity and inclusion for the least of us.â?•

Thomas said heâ??s just a â??people person, always trying to figure out a way to alleviate the pain of others.â?•

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1. All Posts

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