

She canâ??t see, but guides patients at SF General, dodges the maskless on MUNI and seldom lets obstacles dampen her high spirits

Description

default watermark

Hereâ??s a thought: If you are blind, how do you know if people are wearing their masks?

If you are disabled and blind, itâ??s scary stepping off the sidewalk to avoid a loud-talking, apparently non-masked person.

If you are disabled and blind and riding the 14-Mission, the 38- Geary, or the 9-San Bruno every day, as 61-year-old Susan Vela does, you sure overhear a lot of conflicts about masks, as she tells it:

â??Those MUNI buses were not without their problems before COVID-19. And now, you must wear masks to board the bus, but people get into fights about it,â?• she said. â??It was worse early in the pandemic; they used all kinds of profanity. The bus driver will stop the bus right in its tracks and say, â??We are not moving till you put on your mask or get off the bus.â??

â??Oh, I tell you, itâ??s a regular soap opera, like â??Days of Our Lives.â?? I just sit there and say a little prayer: Just get me home, just get me home. COVID has definitely made me feel more vulnerable.â?•

15 minutes of fame

Susan never imagined that her larger-than-life-size image would be gracing the sides of those very MUNI buses this winter, part of a public service campaign highlighting the work of the San Francisco - Marin Food Bank. Because she is a longtime client, the program manager asked her if she would be in the ad, and she agreed: â??They took me to a studio on Bryant Street and did a whole photo shoot, makeup and all. It was a hoot!â?•



Susan Vela, right, with Alexandra Danino, manager of the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank. (Photo courtesy of San Francisco-Marin Food Bank.)

For over four years, the food bank has delivered fresh food â?? â??I love the oranges, the carrots, not so muchâ?• â?? to her door in the Tenderloin, where she lives on Social Security Disability income in a studio apartment. Her building is a supported services hotel, on a block that can resemble a scene from â??Danteâ??s Inferno.â?•

On a recent day, Vela nimbly navigated her way down Eddy Street, her cane delicately probing for sprawled bodies.

Her building, designed for homeless and disabled single adults, has case managers and social workers on-site, but itâ??s not the same as sharing an apartment with her mom, with whom she lived till her death in 2003.

â??She was my best friend and I miss her every day.â?•

With a song in her heart

Susan is a native daughter of San Francisco, born on Geary Boulevard in 1960 at what is now the French Campus of Kaiser Hospital. She grew up in Pacifica in a ranch-style house with her parents and brother, and lots of pets. She worked in customer service, phone sales, and reception before her vision loss.

â??I began gradually losing my sight in 1999 due to diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, and now I canâ??t really see anything at all.â•

In addition to vision loss, sheâ??s had to overcome childhood abuse, and survived a serious, chronic health condition resulting in several emergency surgeries, one as recently as last April.



Vela at the reception desk in the lobby of San Francisco General Hospital. (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

Yet she remains resilient, cheerful and compassionate. Until COVID shut-downs, she had accumulated thousands of volunteer hours as a patient ambassador in the front lobby of Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, the busiest, most chaotic trauma center in the city.

Her voice is loud, strong and enthusiastic as she describes her work. Although she canâ??t see, Vela has spent her days escorting patients to appointments, calling them cabs, directing visitors, patients,

and delivery vendors to their departments. She canâ??t use a computer but memorized names, departments, phone numbers, directions, and many of MUNIâ??s lines and routes.

â??I helped navigate the place for patients, visitors, vendors, all people coming and going. I knew every inch of the hospital because I volunteered there for 10 years.â?•

Vela also entertains. When the mood hits her, she grabs her cane as faux microphone and belts out a standard like Petula Clarkâ??s â??Downtown,â?• modernizing the lyrics: â??DOWNTOWN, where STARBUCKS is waiting for YOOOUUUUâ?¦â?•

â??I call myself a wayfinderâ??

Eventually, the hospital changed her status from volunteer to paid staffer. Her official title is wayfinding patient ambassador. But â?• I call myself a way finder,â?• she said. â??I show them the way to San Jose, like the song says.â?•

Vela lights up when talking about escorting kids and parents to the pediatric unit and admits to a soft spot for women coming in for pregnancy terminations.

default watermark



Vela is known to erupt in song now and then. (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

â??I (would take) special sensitive time for the ladies who come to the Womenâ??s Options Clinic. Because I know they are very nervous about their procedures. I try to cheer them up a little bit when I take them up to the 6th floor.â?• And when they get hungry, Vela brings them sandwiches.

She often sports a red beret and channels Betty Boop, one of her favorite cartoon characters, often ending her salutations chirping â??Boop Boop de Boop.â?• She is slight, with a fringe of thinning brown hair that flops over her round face. She has a broad forehead, a wide smile, and wears woven bracelets up the length of her slender arms.

She tap dances around her Tenderloin room to the music of her big crush, the Canadian singer Michael Buble, whom she finally got to hear live last September at Chase Arena when a friend scored some free tickets.

â??I have his posters all over my room and Oh, I cried like a baby, I yelled: Michael I love you. I shouted, I screamed, I jumped. Oh, I lost my voice for a couple of days. My friend, she was worried I was going to embarrass her by throwing my private underwear, hah, but I didnâ??t go that far!â?• and she chortles at the memory.

To say Susan misses working at the hospital is an understatement, though she knows itâ??s safer that way. â??I miss working terribly, terribly. There are so many other things I donâ??t do cause of COVID, it makes not going to work at General Hospital harder.â?•

Much she misses

What else does she miss? She barely stops to think and blurts out, â??Great America! Ah, I miss going there. I would save up my pennies for that! I love the roller coaster, I love the carousel. I would make a day of it. Not anymore.

default watermark

â??And I miss going to the movies and listening to the soundtracks. I love thrillers and scary movies and dancing in the aisles to musicals. I miss pigging out on buttery popcorn though it would fly all over my lap when I got scared.â?•

She pauses, and then adds in a rush: â??I miss going into funky shops like Buffalo Exchange and Crossroads Trading company where I browse for treasures. All the staff there know me and help me find what I need: usually wallets, berets, purses, backpacks.

I miss the fresh salads and wonderful soups I would get at St. Martin De Porres till COVID closed it down. Heck, I even miss eating at my favorite greasy spoon diner on Golden Gate Avenue.â?•

But in true Susan-esque fashion, she focuses on what she does have, like her case manager, Marisol, and the HomeBridge home care providers who stop in daily to help her with (laundry, picking up prescriptions, cleaning and light cooking.

She looks forward to her fresh food deliveries from the food bank, and will soon be getting computer training at the Lighthouse for the Blind.

â??I canâ??t wait till I can go back to my work at the hospital. It makes me really extra happy to be around people, and put smiles on their faces by helping them,â?• she said.

â??For now, I dance around my room and sing as if I were on â??American Idol,â?• or as if I were old Blue Eyes himself. Sometimes I picture myself on â?? not â??Americaâ??s Got Talentâ?• *â??* but Susanâ??s doing pretty OK.â?•

Category

1. All Posts

Date Created

01/02/2022
Author
naomi-marcus

default watermark