

Support housing tenant makes the most of his microwave and contributes to the nabe with â??pedestrian protectionâ??

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How do you eat If you are on a fixed income and live in a single-room occupancy hotel? When the pandemic closed a lot of your favorite cheap food spots? If you are Christopher Coleman, you get creative with your mini fridge and microwave.

â??The way you cook a juicy porkchop in a microwave, you get a salad-size plastic bowl, you put the pork chop in the bowl with a little salt and pepper and water. It takes about 10 to 12 minutes, see, and it cooks through at all angles, and it gets all the fat and grease out of it, it really does. And itâ??s juicy too, not dry! Then I season with lemon juice, Frenchâ??s mustard**.â?•**

Christopher, 59, lives at the Star Hotel at Mission and 18th streets, housing with on-site support services for formerly homeless people with complex mental health needs. Run by DISH (Delivering Innovation In Supportive Housing) in partnership with the San Francisco Department of Public Health, it has 52 units on three floors.


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Coleman has lived at the Star Hotel for eight years. Heâ??s retired now but helps the neighborhood with what he and his friends call pedestrian protection. They watch out for faltering seniors, runaway dogs. and thieves. (All photos by Naomi Marcus)

He prepares his food on a table that also holds his TV. Thereâ??s a sink in his small, one-window room, and a twin bed. Bathrooms and showers are in the hallways. Rooms also come with a phone line to the front desk and cable television.

Master of the microwave

Cooking credits go to his mother, who showed him how as he grew up in New York. Coleman has lived in the Mission District for years, but his native Bronx survives in the rich, fat â??New Yawkâ?• vowels of his speech.

â??She *taawt* me how to make a lot of dishes,â?• he said, â??meatballs with ground chuck, eggs, cheese, parsley, and olive oil. A little garlic, a little onion, diced. You need a gas stove for those, though.â?•

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He doesnâ??t have a gas stove, but he has mastered the art of microwave. Pasta and peas, for example.

â??Put the pasta â?? I like the shells â?? in a plastic Tupperware bowl, salad size with water to cover, and cook it for 22 minutes, till al dente, then put it in a strainer over the sink. I then put the Prego sauce on top and put it back in the microwave for 6 or 7 minutes and then I add grated cheese, a little salt â?? not too much â?? garlic and onion powder, a little Italian seasoning. Itâ??s not too bad, really!â?•

He grins at the memory then cautions, â??Now with frozen peas, you only go three minutes, just a bit of water, if you go more than three, then the peas shrink, get wrinkly and dry out. But with a little butter and three minutes, you got some delicious peas.â?•

His mother also brought him to San Francisco. She came to find New York depressing. Coleman, too, said he would not go back for anything.



Coleman landed at the Star Hotel after living with his mother, his brother, who are both now deceased, and a board and care home.

â??In the Bronx, we lived on Leidig Avenue, near the *pawkway*. It was nice in the â??70s and early â??80s, but *Maaw* didnâ??t want to be there anymore., Being a single mom and all, she brought me out to join my older brother. That was New Yearâ??s Eve, 1994, and I guess I *taawk* like her â??cause we lived together a long time, you know, back in the day.â??

Coleman, a gentle, earnest presence, paused then said, â??She was not a happy woman, *Maaw.* She passed away April 3, 2014, from emphysema, from smoking. But she could cook!â?•

Coleman, on the other hand, is a contented man, grateful and cheerful. In his 30 years in San Francisco, heâ??s lived with his brother, with his mom, then at a board and care home in the Outer Mission and now, he is happily situated at the Star Hotel.

â??I aim to stay at the Star forever,â??â?? said Coleman, a stocky man with a youthful round face, deep-set brown eyes, and a gap-toothed smile.

Work and SSI

â??On St Patrickâ??s Day, I celebrated eight years here. Itâ??s a great place even if I have to buy COMBAT for the, you know, the critters,â?• he said, spreading his fingers out and scuttling them along a wall to illustrate. Hand movements often accompany his speech.

â??They do a room inspection once a month, and I always pass,â?• he said, explaining, â??They check that we are keeping the rooms neat and tidy, you know. Not hoarding, not cluttered. The landlord says I am doing good, keep it neat and clean.â?•

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Coleman receives services through Mission Mental Health Clinic, a community wellness center and outpatient clinic.

Ask Chris how he got to the Star, and he recites the names of some of the social workers, case managers, doctors, and nurses who have helped him along the way.

â??Marta, my case manager, got me into this hotel, and Doc Mommsen helped me with my meds, and the nurse Bose was always nice.â?•

He has had many jobs to supplement his disability benefits, including part-time work as a custodian, street cleaner, and groundskeeper at a fancy Telegraph Hill condo complex. But heâ??s retired now.

â??You know, Iâ??ve had a lot of jobs in this town, but the fact is, I canâ??t give 100 percent effort like I used to, because I have less energy.â?•

Protecting pedestrians

Chris may live at the Star, but most days you can find him, with his buddies James and Fernando, at the corner of 16th and Valencia, looking out for pedestrians**.**

*â??*Pandemic Pedestrian Protection we called it. James got us these yellow vests, so we look more official, said Coleman, pausing to look around the busy intersection. â??He and Fernando carry the walkie-talkies and even have bodycams.â?•



Wearing a yellow vest, Coleman keeps an eye on the streets around the Star Hotel, making sure pedestrians are safe.

Covid prompted the idea, he said. â??When Covid hit, I committed to coming out to the corner every day to help out, to not isolate, to keep community. And I am still doing it. James, it was his idea. He is more assertive than me.â?•

His buddies take down the license plates of red-light runners, â??but me, I jump in and help all the pedestrians,â?• he said. â??You know out of all the United States, I heard that this town is the worst for pedestrians San Francisco has lots of pedestrian deaths.

So, what we do is, see, like, take Mary. Mary is very old, pretty old. I guess elderly you would call her, and she is very short, hard to see if you get me. So, if I see her trying to get across the street with her walker, I jump in and help to make sure that no one hits her. I escort her if you will call it, â??cause she is really slow and really tiny crossing the street.

â??And Maria, with her beanie, she is slower than Mary, so I help her, too. The cars around here, they can be very aggressive, let me tell you.

â??So, we mainly watch whatâ??s going on. We pay attention. Sometimes dogs get loose from their owners, and we help grab them, stuff like that. Being useful, you know.â?•

Coleman also used to shop and do errands for his brother, Randy, 71, a retired waiter and amateur artist whose work was published in the San Francisco Bay View. Randy died earlier this year.

The last relative

â??He was my last relative. I couldnâ??t reach him at his Polk Street apartment for a few days, so I went and let myself in with my key, and I found him, you know, deceased, on the floor.

â??I havenâ??t even cried very much, you know, but I miss him, he was good company. We always went to the Peetâ??s on Polk, Polk and Broadway. It was fun. We got the raspberry iced tea. He was a good artist, and thatâ??s a hard life to be an artist. He had a lot of ailments though. We watched movies together, the last one we watched was â??Skyfall,â?• with Daniel Craig.â?•

Ask what he likes most about his community, he quickly offered, â??Once a year in May, we have a tenants appreciation luncheon, in the Tenderloin. They serve ribs and chicken, and we have a raffle, a celebration if you will.

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â??And most days, I go to the Centro Latino over there on 15th Street. They make wonderful lunches for Latinos of a senior age, and you know,â?• he lowers his voice,â?• I am not Latino but I *am* nearly 60 and I *am* a part of the community and they welcome me there, and I appreciate that.â?•

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Date Created
24/03/2024
Author
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