

A lucky phone call steered him into a 54-year career as a shipping executive.

Description

default watermark

Tony Hanley felt stuck. Heâ??d flunked out of San Francisco City College and was working at an unsatisfying job as a stock clerk at Jackson Hardware and Houseware in the Sunset District. For three years, he shelved merchandise, made deliveries, and swept floors. He was 20 years old and had no idea how to find a real career.

â??I was making about $200 a month and still living with my parents in Ingleside,â?• he said.

A friend called and told him heâ??d been promoted and invited Hanley to take his old job as a â??mail boy.â?• It was up for the taking, his friend said. Hanley passed; he wouldnâ??t take the risk of switching jobs. But later that day, the hardware store owner pulled him aside and told him that the business was being sold. He was about to be unemployed.



Fort Mason is one of Tony Hanleyâ??s favorite places. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Hanley called his friend back and ultimately landed the entry-level position at Matson Navigation. He grins as he recalls how lucky he was to get that job. â??Without working too hard, itâ??s being in the right place at the right time. Now thatâ??s serendipity.â?•

That phone call launched an executive-level career, in which Hanley held 15 different jobs with Matson, many centered on the cityâ??s waterfront, something he misses to this day.

On the waterfront

â??Working on San Franciscoâ??s waterfront for 40 of my 54 years at Matson were the finest years of my working life. I worked with the longshoremen who shared the same work ethic, staying focused and positive with lots of respect for the work they did, and lots of camaraderie along the way.â?•

Now 86, Hanley talks of his tenure with Matson with pride, remembering how he helped the company fight for the lead in the competitive shipping business. He was active in community and local business affairs while working for Matson in Hawaii and remained active when he returned to San Francisco.

His first job at Matson was modest: He picked up and delivered mail on San Francisco piers 32, 34, 35, and 45, along with Matsonâ??s office building on Market Street.

He didnâ??t remain in the mailroom for long. Over the years, he advanced to jobs as timekeeper, superintendent, industrial engineering assistant, and eventually assistant to the vice president of human resources. His last job, and the one he remembers most fondly, was director of sales for Northern California, where he built long-standing relationships with clients like Nissan, Safeway, Chrysler, and Ford.

â??I loved all these jobs,â?• he said. â??I never said no to a new job.â?•



Modern container ships carry thousands of cargo-filled containers. (Photo by Ian Taylor on Unsplash)

Hanley started with Matson as the shipping industry was on the cusp of a major transformation. His mailroom job has long since been made obsolete by email and social media, and computers are now

on the desk of every executive. Freight, once shipped in boxes and loaded by hand, is now loaded into containers stacked on enormous ships, an innovation that has greatly improved efficiency at the expense of many jobs.

By the mid-1960s, unions were fighting containerization, and that led to a series of strikes. A work stoppage in the early â??70s lasted for three months. Hanley had no role in the negotiations, but he worked on the waterfront and trained the non-union employees on how to protect ships from vandalism.

â??It was a worrisome time, but we all got through it,â?• he said.

Honolulu bound

In 1987, Hanley and his wife, Linda, moved to Honolulu when he became the superintendent of container operations. By then, his son and daughter were off to college and married.

â??There was a bit of an adjustment to living in Hawaii and adapting to a lifestyle that is more easy-going. The best part was learning about all customs, cultures, and ethnicities; a melding of native Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Samoan, Portuguese, and many others.â?•

default watermark

He was active in civic affairs, becoming the president of the Portuguese Chamber of Commerce, although he is not of Portuguese ancestry. Hanley was also president of the Hawaii Island Economic Development Committee, president of the Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce, and chairman of Hawaii Island United Way.

The couple moved back to San Francisco in 1989.



With Alcatraz in the background, Tony Hanley enjoys sitting by the Bay. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Even though heâ??s been retired for 11 years, he stays in touch with Matson as an active member of â??*Kamaaina,* which means local in Hawaiian). The online group of 30 Matson retirees meets on Zoom three times a year, where they socialize, keep current with the industry, and hear news about the company from current Matson executives.

Hanley is a native San Franciscan, born at St. Maryâ??s Hospital. He has five siblings and lived with his parents in the Ingleside District until his marriage.

â??My dad was in sales for a hotel supply company; we were not poor â?? but not middle income either. My mom eventually had to go back into teaching to provide additional financial support.â?•

His family was religious and close to the Jesuits. â??Frequently, we would have a priest visitor over for dinner.â?•

Proving a point

When Hanley was in high school, a guidance counselor told him he wasnâ??t college material, a dismissal that rankled over the years. Even after failing at college, Hanley wanted to prove that counselor wrong. â??Many years passed, but the determination to prove myself never faded,â?• he said.

While working at Matson, he returned to college at San Francisco State University and earned a degree in business and labor relations. Receiving that degree with his wife and children watching was one of the proudest moments of his life, he said.

Hanley has a son and a daughter and four grandsons, all living in the Bay Area. When he and his wife moved back to San Francisco, they settled into a condo in the Embarcadero and then moved into the Heritage on the Marina, a senior living complex, in 2017.

Theyâ??ve been happy at the Heritage. Their apartment features a view of the Bay. And Hanley continues to be involved in civic affairs and is secretary of the Heritage board of directors. In July, he testified before the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to win approval for the Heritage to add 23 units. The board granted preliminary approval, and Hanley said he will stay involved as the process proceeds. Heritage, he said, is a family, and â??itâ??s important to look out for everyone.â?•

default watermark

He stays fit with daily walks and enjoys playing mahjong and a somewhat similar game called Rummikub with other Heritage residents. He still plays golf at the Presidio but not as often as he once did.



Tony Hanley in front of his home, the Heritage on the Marina. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

He has been a member of the board of directors for the Golden Gate Boys Choir and Bellringers, a Catholic music program that presents about four concerts each year. He assists with fundraising for the annual appeal, sends letters to prospective donors, and assists with grant writing. Last year, the group sponsored a trip to Rome where a group of boys sang for the Pope.

As Hanley chats with a visitor in one of the sitting rooms of the Heritage, music plays softly in the background. A wedge of sunlight warms him as he settles into a tufted Queen Anne chair. In a sense, his life, his â??serendipity,â?• has come full circle to a contented last chapter.

You can reach author Myra Krieger here: myrakrieger@sfseniorbeat.com

Category

1. All Posts

Date Created
19/07/2025
Author

myra-editor

default watermark