

MAKING LEMONADE FROM LEMONS

Told by Jenny Midtgaard

Joe Tysdale was the kind of volunteer everyone would love to have. Dedicated to the success of each year's Gilroy Garlic Festival, he carried out his volunteer duties enthusiastically. Even when he was battling leukemia, being kept alive with an oxygen tank strapped to his side, he would arrive on Monday with a crew of guys to construct the Festival's "Gourmet Alley" by Friday. Then he'd put in three long, hot, and tiring days on his famous pasta pots, cooking pasta *con pesto* for the thousands of annual visitors. Joe's superhuman commitment and his perseverance were not unusual, however. The Gilroy Garlic Festival inspires extraordinary dedication, since it bolstered a community in need of pride and a sense of identity.

Rudy Melone remembers coming to Gilroy in the late 1970s and being shocked. He had heard the snide remarks and the backhand jokes. He saw the self-deprecating attitude of the residents. When people visited this California town of 32,000, residents would apologize for the odor. If asked about Gilroy, few townsfolk would mention the beautiful garlic fields—which stretched for many miles—or the huge garlic-processing plants. They figured it was better to just ignore the garlic. Lots of people hated the smell and the taste, anyway.

"There was a general embarrassment about the garlic," says Melone, who had been hired as president of the local community college. "But as

I saw it, it was something to be proud of.” An Italian American who had been raised eating lots of garlic, he set out to remedy the problem of the town’s low self-esteem, with his own version of making lemonade from lemons.

Melone had heard of a small town in France, Arleux, which hosted eighty thousand people at its annual garlic festival. In fact, Arleux was claiming to be “the garlic capital of the world.” Melone knew Gilroy’s garlic production and processing far surpassed that of any other area. He needed a way to convince Gilroyans that they should have a garlic festival of their own.

Volunteerism had always been strong and vital to the town’s character. Community groups were big in Gilroy—so were bake sales, car washes, door-to-door magazine peddling, and lots of little sales to raise money for good causes. Appointed as the local Rotary’s fund-raising chairman, Melone was charged with raising money for their projects and for the Chamber of Commerce. If he could present a garlic festival as a fund-raising effort, he might just get the town’s support, he thought.

His first step was to sell the idea to his Rotary Club. He copied reams of documents about the healthful effects of garlic, located an abundance of garlic recipes, found articles on the love of garlic in Arleux, and pasted them around the room at the next meeting. Interesting stuff, said the members, but so what? Undeterred, Melone drove down to the local café and had coffee with the garlic growers who gathered there every morning.

“Couldn’t we get all the growers together, put on a nice lunch, and

really show the Rotary people the value of garlic?” he asked them. Don Christopher, now one of the world’s largest garlic shippers, agreed to co-host, with Melone, a lunch prepared by chef Val Filice.

They invited both local and national media to the garlic meal, which was judged “incredible.” The Gilroy community leaders stood around chatting with the visiting journalists. Betsy Bosley of the *Los Angeles Times* took Christopher aside and urged him to run with the idea of a garlic festival. “This is going so well, we should do it every year,” Melone said casually to Harvey Steinem of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The next week, Steinem wrote about the luncheon and the festival idea in his column, and the bulb was rolling.

Of course there were skeptics. In fact, several of the town’s big shots laughed out loud when Melone suggested the First Annual Gilroy Garlic Festival. But he kept asking. And when planning started, they were all there to help. Seven months later, the first Garlic Festival arrived, funded on borrowed money and planned by a small committee, with big hopes and more than a few doubts.

Melone remembers the quiet on the first morning of the festival—the stillness, light traffic, and slight fog. “We wondered if anyone would come to our party,” he says. But after a while the sun popped through, bringing with it hordes of garlic lovers. The crowd was overwhelming. The fifteen thousand tickets printed for the event ran out, so volunteers went out to collect them, and brought them back to the ticket booth to recycle them.

Meanwhile, local women were frantically cooking pasta in a house on Bloomfield Road. In his booming voice, Filice, head chef of Gourmet

Alley, ordered several men to drive to Monterey for more prawns and squid. Halfway through the first day, the beer-committee chairman called Budweiser: “Heck, forget the kegs. Start sending us the trucks!”

That first festival netted nineteen thousand dollars. In the eighteen years since then, the festival has brought over \$4 million to the community. More than four thousand volunteers from all parts of Gilroy have worked hundreds of jobs, earning an hourly wage to donate to their favorite charity. Collectively, they make big contributions to the community they now care so much about.

In 1995 the local Elks Lodge raised more than ten thousand dollars to buy eyeglasses for poor children, aid a family who had lost their home in a fire, and build a flag-lined walk to honor veterans. Hope Rehabilitation, which teaches disabled people to work, earned more than three thousand dollars. Melone’s idea of getting the town to celebrate garlic rather than being ashamed of it has clearly been more than successful. But there were other benefits as well.

“What I’m most proud of is how the festival has brought the people of Gilroy together,” says Melone, now seventy-one. Gilroy’s multicultural community— Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian as well as the original Italian families—all pitch in. Festival volunteers often find themselves working elbow-to-elbow with someone they might never have met. School parents work with Gilroy Hispanic Chamber of Commerce members. Boy Scouts sell programs alongside 4-H members. High-school football players dish up pasta next to choir members.

Melone asks, “How often can you raise dollars for your favorite cause, but also have fun yourself?” Enjoyable as it is, the festival is only

half of the event for the volunteers. Each year they're rewarded for their hard work at the volunteers' barbecue, hosted by the festival on Labor Day weekend. At the barbecue, volunteers share stories and greet the people they now know so well after working together.

Sadly, Joe Tysdale didn't make it to the 1996 volunteers' barbecue. He'd been too ill to come to the festival as well. But he did send his son and his daughter-in-law, and even several relatives from out of state, to work his shifts.

As the exhausted crew began to close down Gourmet Alley on Sunday night, they received word that Joe was dying. Steve Morrow, his friend and fellow Elks member, says, "We were closing down shop at roughly the same time Joe was dying. Exhausted as we were, we felt as though he was there, watching over the last detail, holding on just long enough to be sure we had done a good job."

Joe died that night. But his spirit lives on in the hearts of all the dedicated volunteers who make Gilroy a pretty special place to visit, and a very proud community in which to live.

Volunteering is good for the soul.

STEVE ALLEN

Work with your local **Rotary Club** to turn your community's problems into win-win situations. Call 847-866-3245 for the Rotary Club closest to you. Come to the annual Gilroy Garlic Festival, held the last full weekend in July. For information, visit www.gilroygarlicfestival.com.