

Local News

‘It was hard to have hope’: From homeless to home for the holidays

After years of living on the streets and in his car, John Tuitasi is celebrating his first Christmas in his new apartment



After being homeless for decades, John Tuitasi, 58, hangs Christmas decorations in his new home in San Jose, Calif., on Thursday, Dec. 5, 2024. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)



By **RYAN MACASERO** | rmacasero@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
UPDATED: December 9, 2024 at 4:41 AM PST

John Tuitasi’s eyes welled up as twinkling lights reflected in his pupils as he gazed at his first-ever Christmas tree now standing in the corner of his new North San Jose apartment.

“That’s the first tree I’ve had in a long time,” Tuitasi said, seated on his new sofa, wiping a tear from his eye. It’s a small tree, but it’s his — symbolic of his new life and a fresh start.

Homeless since age 15, mostly in and around San Jose, the now 58-year-old Tuitasi suffered a stroke three years ago. That moment became a turning point, prompting him to vow to change his life and quit drinking.

Though he worked intermittently as a caregiver and held other jobs, his income was never enough to provide stability.

Born in Oakland into an unstable family with nine siblings, Tuitasi ran away from home and dropped out of school in ninth grade. In his 20s and 30s, he struggled with heavy partying and drug use, leading to years of precarious living situations. He often found himself on the streets or sleeping in his car, with his pit bull, Spike, as his only companion.

Hope is hard to come by for those living on the streets, but at times, it was all Tuitasi had, even without knowing when his luck might change.

“People judged me for the way I looked, but I always told myself that one day I’d better myself,” Tuitasi said. “Still, it was hard to have hope. Sometimes, I felt like I had no future — until I went to the hospital. Staff from a housing program came and told me they had a place for me — Jamboree had this place for me to live.”

Tuitasi was referring to Jamboree Housing Corporation, which helped him move into Hillview Court, a supportive housing project in Milpitas. There, he spent three years rebuilding his life, focusing on his health, finances, and stability.

But the journey wasn’t without challenges.

Living in a complex with neighbors facing substance abuse and mental health struggles tested his resolve. Yet, Tuitasi remained determined to stay on track.

“John’s is a common story of people who, without guidance from family or parents, can fall into homelessness,” said Laura Archuleta, CEO of Jamboree. “What struck me most was how, despite his illness and recovery, he never seemed to lose hope. He seized the opportunities available to him. That’s the key — people need to be ready to take that step.”

Tuitasi’s story is just one of thousands in California, where many like him continue to struggle with homelessness.

In 2023, California’s homeless population increased by 6%, reaching more than 181,000 people — the highest of any state — accounting for nearly 30% of the nation’s unhoused population, according to federal data. In the Bay Area, an estimated 38,000 people are experiencing homelessness.

With help from Jamboree and Abode Services, another organization assisting unhoused individuals, Tuitasi received critical support, including case management, health and mental health services, and connections to essential resources, said Julie Marquez, director of support services for Santa Clara County. He also learned how to apply for a government voucher program for low-income residents, which allowed him to rent an apartment in a middle income complex, where he currently lives.

Tuitasi spent his first night in his new apartment last month. It was, he said, the most peaceful rest he’d had in years.

For the first time in his adult life, there were no police alarms ringing, no neighbors fighting, “just peace,” he said. “The first day I moved in here, it felt like I finally made it. I finally got where I needed to be. This is where I can rest and sleep at night.”

Now, Tuitasi is focused on building his independence, including learning how to budget for his needs and save money — skills that are new to him but ones he’s committed to mastering.

“The staff at Abode and Jamboree helped me understand how to budget my Social Security,” Tuitasi said. “I’m happy I can now eat better and buy healthier food.”

Tuitasi’s holiday plans are modest but meaningful. He’ll host his niece, nephew, and caretaker for a small celebration with food to mark his new life. There will be no drugs or alcohol, Tuitasi said emphatically.

Tuitasi hopes to serve as a positive role model for others experiencing homelessness and dreams of mentoring young people to help them avoid life on the streets.

“I really want to be a mentor — to kids, men, and women who need someone like me to talk with them,” he said. “Because someone did that for me. I want to let people know, you don’t have to let your past define you. You can always start new.”

