

## A Chair for Meecha

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Early one September morning, on the driving range of Green Tree Golf Club, 62-year-old Tony Love stood alone and practiced his long-range shots. In the foreground, the horizon lingered lazily, anticipating the sun's morning yawn. Behind him, a bag of clubs stood at arms, waiting to be picked. A head cover on his driver, that of a smiling pink pig donning dark sunglasses, distinguished itself from the iron dozen.

Likewise, this Georgia native - a lean, handsome, and middle-aged looking man with a shaved head and goat-tee the color of falling snowflakes - stood out from the group of men he would be playing golf with on this already warm and cloudless day.

Dressed entirely in his usual black attire, Love has a ubiquitous

golf presence at Green Tree, owned by Syar Industries. He frequents the Vacaville location three to four times a week and with a cigar stub perched gently on the corner of his mouth – a fixture during his golf games – Love appears to be a staple at this club.

“I’ve known this guy for years,” Vacaville resident Love said of Andy, an older gentleman who stood behind the register at the Pro Shop. “Yep, he sure has,” Andy responded slowly, before turning to count some change in a rather nonchalant way.

For Love, the gentle graces of a southerner are unmistakably present, even when he becomes as competitive in his game as Tiger Woods during a tournament. Still, he is a serious and devoted golfer who has been playing the circuit for more than five years. A course at Solano College, he said, helped pioneer this passion.

But there is more to this man who stands behind the mirrored sunglasses he wears. This Vietnam vet, who served two tours in a place flooded with rancorous turmoil, feels genuine compassion for others and takes the necessary steps to make a change.

Meecha Bregante Corbett is a 15-year-old Japanese girl with Cerebral Palsy who has spent her life bound to a wheelchair, staring at the lower backside of folks on a daily basis. She was adopted just before her first birthday by Jennifer Bregante and Corbett, both aware of the challenges they would face with their new daughter.

“Her disability wasn’t the issue. I have other people in my family with disabilities and I work in the field. The disability is in how people think. And that’s what causes the barriers,” Jennifer said.

Tony sees beyond the barriers, however, and treats Meecha like he does others. It’s this rapport that has made them dear friends, a relationship they developed years back after meeting at Corbett’s house. They have given each other the gift of friendship, Jennifer commented, and share a sense of humor and special bond.

But for Meecha, Tony has also given her a sense of hope.

For anyone trying to understand Meecha’s desire to speak with someone at eye level, Tony is a close observer. He has witnessed her complaints; has seen Meecha ignored by people, heard of how students swing their backpacks with an arch wide enough to hit her head, and even, has observed the anguished tears from neck strain.

“She feels invisible. She’s slumped down on her chair and is easily ignored,” Tony said of Meecha. “When people are disabled, people don’t want to look at them.”

A few months ago, while watching the Colbert Report on TV, Tony saw the iBot chair – a chair that would allow Meecha to climb stairs and curbs by rotating its two sets of powered wheels. It also allows Meecha to see the world at eye level since it can rise from a sitting level to about 6 feet. But the chair comes packaged with the heavy cost of more than \$25,000.

He talked to his wife, Stephanie, about the possible purchase while they sat in their backyard. And without hesitation, Stephanie agreed.

“Stephanie immediately supported the idea,” Tony said. “Yes, it will be a pinch but we’ll grow the money back; I trust that. And it will change Meecha’s life.”

### Humble Beginnings

For Tony, who has this enormous self-confidence together with unpretentiousness, the idea of “giving money” initially seemed alien to him.

Born in Atlanta, to what he describes as an “upper-poor class family,” Tony spent his childhood wearing hand-me-down clothing from neighborhood friends while living in a run-down house inherited from his grandmother.

Tony admits he came from humble beginnings and remembers when people from the community, or the church, helped his family when needed. And when possible, he said, his family would return the favor.

It seems Tony can easily step back into that era but chooses to forget certain memories, like the time his entire junior class received their senior rings. Well, all except for him and another

student. The reason, he said with disbelief, was because they weren't paying tuition. And the result, he added, left him embarrassed.

He did mention a '54 Chevrolet that he and his friends would drive whenever they "could afford the gas," a car that was hand-painted black in Love tradition.

Joining the U.S. Army just days before his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday seemed to be a natural fit for Tony. Now a retired Army Master Sergeant, he spent his first years in Special Forces, with two trips to Vietnam in a close combat, Black Operational program. He spent time teaching military freefall techniques to the Chinese and Korean Special Forces and continued working in the Army after moving Stateside, namely in Linguistics and Communications.

Tony retired 20 years to the day, although the memories remain active. He now lives with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, rated 70 percent disabled by the Veteran's Administration, and as an outdoorsman, is a creature of the mind-clearing habit of golf.

"That's pretty good for a geezer," he said smiling after birdieing the 11<sup>th</sup> hole.

Eye to Eye

It's been one month since Meecha received the iBot chair and already, the changes are noticeable. She moves about freely in school and can talk with her classmates at eye level. Her vision for the future has also progressed to another level. She has designed a plan to attend Expressions College in Berkeley, where she will study Theater, and expects to work for Pixar one day.

"The chair was the right gift at the right time; I couldn't say enough," Jennifer said. "To be at an eye level and look at their faces is a completely new experience. She's deeply moved; it's a gift of a lifetime, a life changing event."

A light breeze crossed the 12<sup>th</sup> hole at Green Tree and for a moment, life stood still, as if holding its breath.

"Oh, that was a great shot," Tony said, breaking the silence. He put another cigar in his mouth while his golf buddies, Jack, Ernie and Bob, raced in their carts, like cue balls on a pool table. And then Tony followed suit.

Weeks ago at Tony's place, a two-story house nestled on the bend of a cul-de-sac, he mentioned how his legacy would live on through the people he knows, he loves and through those who love him back.

He is a believer in both helping people now, while he can see the results, and in the future. For this reason, Tony became a member of the Legacy Society at Solano Community Foundation in Fairfield, a membership that honors those who have chosen to make a planned gift to the Foundation through their estate plan. It's also a place where his legacy will live on perpetually through an endowment fund.

“I moved to Vacaville in 2001 and I love it here and feel I am part of this community,” he said. “I want to leave something for the people in Solano County.

“Yes, there are problems here but we can’t solve them by complaining or blaming the system; that’s a reason for inaction,” he continued. “If I work to help people with disabilities, to reach out and help at least one person, then I’ve made a difference.”

Tony is performing the art of philanthropy, an act which he was exposed to during his upbringing from the community and that now he wants to give back.

“It feels natural for me to give to someone I know I can help, or give money to Solano Community Foundation, which ensures it goes to needy neighbors I may not know personally,” he said.

Although Tony has options to donate to other organizations, he opts to have his fund at the Foundation because it’s local and he can see what his fund supports. And this, he added, makes him feel better.

"All I need to do is travel to the Foundation's office in Fairfield if I have questions about my fund and the Legacy Society. I know what percentage is going to the cause and I know the principal will always stay the same," he said. "It feels good to know that when I'm gone, people in the county will get money. And I get to feel good about it now."