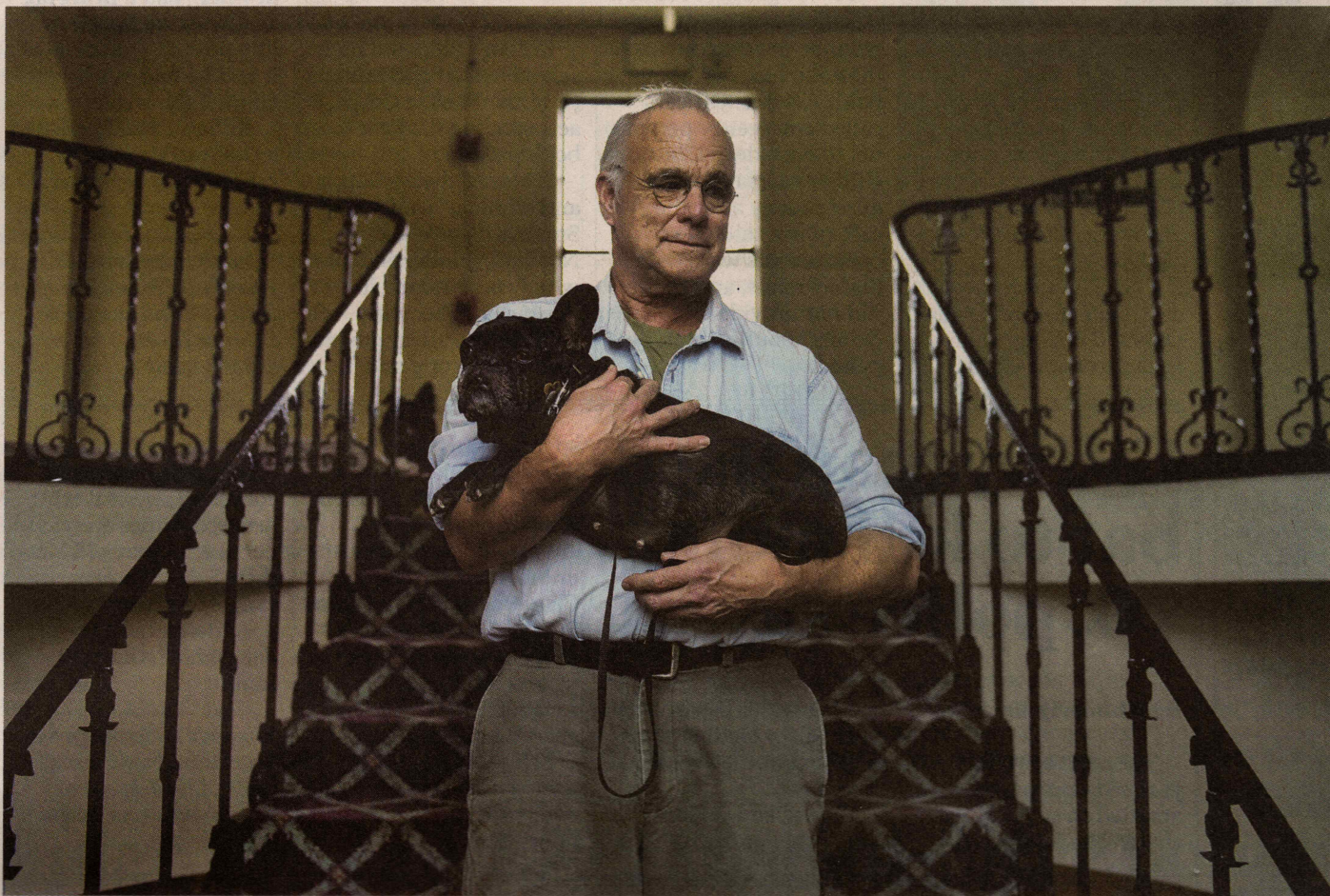




Michael Short / Special to The Chronicle

Artisan keeps home after illness setback

Fund's help with rent bridges gap till disability benefits arrive



By Charles Desmarais

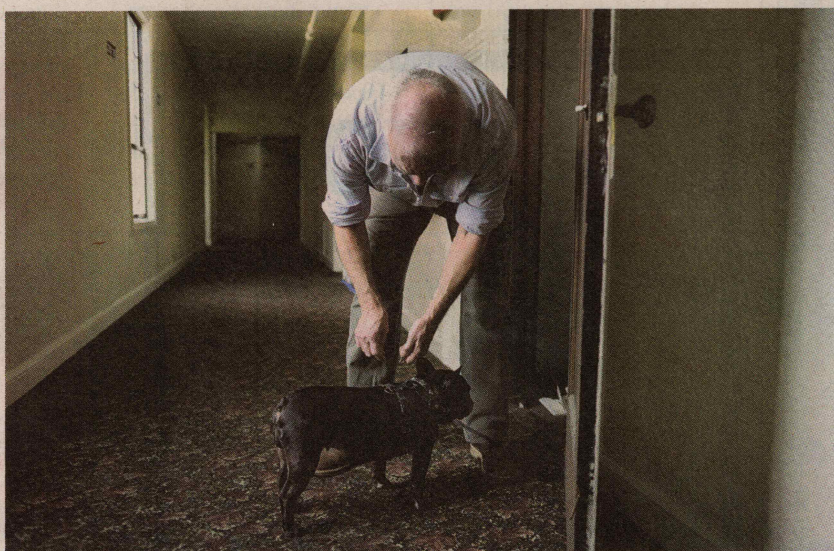
In March, Michael Peterson was a finish carpenter — a skilled artisan with a knack for designing intricate woodwork. In the past, he oversaw as many as six workers executing his plans.

Now, in the middle of a work day, he sits at a slightly awkward distance from a visitor in the ballroom of the once-grand, 1920s-era hotel where he rents a studio apartment in Alameda.

"A Spanish Baroque Moorish sort of thing," he calls the place. "I sort of like decayed grandeur." He bemoans the tattered condition of the room's baseboard and casing, as he proudly shares photographs of elaborate finials and balusters he once would experimentally cut with a band saw.

In April, Peterson, who is 60, suffered two strokes, partially blinding him. "That ended my

Peterson continues on D4



"I used to refer to myself as 'skinless, boneless chicken,' because I just couldn't process anything emotionally. I was absolutely terrified."

Michael Peterson, 60

Michael Peterson, top and above, a finish carpenter who suffered two strokes that cut short his working life, with Sara, his French bulldog, at their apartment building in Alameda.

BAY AREA

Carpenter keeps home till benefits aid arrives

Peterson from page D1

working life like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "Coming out of my stroke I didn't just lose my memory, I lost any kind of — like, the membrane that separates me from the world."

"I used to refer to myself as 'skinless, boneless chicken,' because I just couldn't process anything emotionally." He felt exposed. Unprotected. "I was absolutely terrified."

Peterson's savings dwindled. The rent on his apartment was coming due. He filed a Social Security disability claim — an easy call from a medical point of view, but complicated by the informal nature of his employment. An appeal process dragged on. Since he could not work, his request for unemployment benefits was denied.

"I had no resource," he said. "My friends couldn't pay my rent, and I could no longer borrow because I could no longer work."

Unable to drive, he left the car he had carefully maintained for 17 years in a parking lot, where it was stolen. General Assistance from Alameda County — small grants that must be repaid — and food stamps kept him temporarily afloat, but homelessness loomed.

"I'm new to the business of being bailed out by a private charity," he said. But his friends initiated an application for The Chronicle's Season of Sharing Fund assistance to bridge the gap until disability benefits would help to pay the rent. Peterson believes the three months rent he received from the fund kept him off the street. "They advanced me the money," he said. "I was astounded."

Peterson has no relatives in the Bay Area. In any case, there is little left of the family of four into which he was born. He and his younger

About the fund

For the past 30 years, the Chronicle Season of Sharing Fund has helped more than 100,000 Bay Area individuals and families facing an unexpected life crisis. The idea of neighbors helping neighbors was introduced to The Chronicle by the late Walter A. Haas Jr. and Ira Hirschfield, president of the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, in 1986. Since then, the Chronicle Season of Sharing Fund has distributed \$113 million to help those living in the Bay Area.

Each year, the fund provides temporary assistance to approximately 4,500 families, allocating most of its grants for housing needs, as well as paying for other critical necessities such as essential furniture for families recovering from a fire in their home or helping to purchase a wheelchair. Grants are paid directly to the supplier of services, such as a landlord. Individuals do not receive direct grants from the Chronicle Season of Sharing Fund.

The fund, which also distributes more than \$1 million each year to local food banks, relies on donations from readers. The money is distributed year-round.

Every penny of your donation goes to help those who need it most. All expenses are covered by the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and The San Francisco Chronicle. We are proud to say that since its inception, 100 percent of the money raised for the Chronicle Season of Sharing Fund has gone directly to help the families and communities we serve.

For more information, visit www.seasonofsharing.org.

brother were effectively abandoned as children, after his mother — "a hippie artist" — left a country club life in Southern California for a Sausalito houseboat, then moved to a cabin on the Russian River with a boyfriend.



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Michael Peterson, who could no longer work after suffering two strokes, holds constant companion, Sara.

That was November 1969. He was 15½ years old, his brother 14.

His father went his own way, eventually to have what Peterson wryly calls "kids of his own." His brother committed suicide in 2007 after a long struggle with addiction.

But Peterson is not the type to let such setbacks take him down. Though he left school in the ninth grade, a religious group helped him, at age 18, attend college. The liberal arts education stuck with him — he

easily launches into commentaries on topics ranging from architectural history to ancient Mesopotamia; from Kepler and his stellations of the Platonic Solids, to Descartes and the Age of Reason.

Philosophy did not pay the bills, though. As he put it, "I've basically done every grueling, on-your-knees task there is for minimum wage." That led him to carpentry. Quoting a friend, he said, "Carpentry isn't something you do, carpentry is what happens

to you when you don't do anything."

Life was good, and it became even better when he found the love of his life. He met Sara, his French bulldog, through an ex-girlfriend. "We haven't been apart for more than a couple of hours in seven years, except when I was in the hospital," he said.

Peterson said he has good people in his life, like the ones who applied for support in his name. He remained friends with the girlfriend even after they split and he

moved into the old hotel. "We've been broken up for eight years," he said, "but she is going to come take me to the hospital on Monday."

But he is grateful, also, to people he has never met but who kept him from homelessness.

"Season of Sharing saved me," he said quietly, "in such a profound way."

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