"I knew when I worked in an institutional setting that many of the people there could be in their own homes with proper support. They did not need to be in a board-and-care facility, they needed help staying well at home. This is why I was so passionate about adult day health care." Elizabeth Boardman, SteppingStone Executive Director 1989-2009

SteppingStone began in the Tenderloin in 1983, offering adult day health care in the back room of what is now Curry Senior Services at 333 Turk Street. The agency was one of early adult day health care organizations, created to serve marginalized populations at a time when frail elders and adults with disabilities had few options to help them.
Operating out of a back room at the Curry Center (then North of Market Senior Services) the agency was founded by a handful of dedicated staff led by Marilyn Beffort, the first Executive Director. The SF DPH, through the advocacy and leadership of Gay Kaplan, NP, Clinical Director, provided in-kind support. In 1987 John Tinloy, a DPH medical social worker, joined the agency and would remain involved for the next three decades.

"I considered where I wanted to work and was drawn to SteppingStone (then called North & South of Market Adult Day Health) because I wanted to work in a community setting. I had no experience with adult day health, which was relatively unknown at this time," John Tinloy, former Program Director Mabini, Presentation and Mission Creek Centers.

Tinloy was quickly moved to serve as Program Director of the Center as the need for growth became apparent.

"By 1987 the agency had grown and had its own space at 653 Geary Street, but it was less than ideal. The space was large, but old and with very few windows. A former bank, private offices were few, and the social work staff worked in the former vault which had no windows at all." John Tinloy, former Program Director Mabini, Presentation and Mission Creek Centers.

Elizabeth Boardman was hired in 1989 to help grow the agency, including moving to a new location. This was made more urgent by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that damaged the Geary Street Center. Elizabeth had a vision of co-locating adult day health centers in senior residence facilities so that the residents could receive extensive health support without leaving the building. She sometimes referred to this concept as creating "an adult day health hotel", where residents would have daily access to a health care team.

"The beauty of adult day health care is that it uses an integrated team of clinicians to provide individualized care for each participant. The team is focused on preventative care, keeping clients healthy and improving the quality of their lives." Elizabeth Boardman

SteppingStone was already in discussions with TODCO (Tenants and Owners Development Corporation) which was opening an affordable housing building (Mendelson House) on Mabini Street with the ground floor unoccupied. Over two years SteppingStone raised the funds to build out the space designed to become an adult day health care Center. Mabini Center opened in 1991.
John Tinloy was the first Program Director and recalls moving the furniture and equipment to the new facility. "It was a tremendous improvement to move into the new Center, particularly a space with so much natural light from windows bordering the sidewalks. All the staff and clients were thrilled with the move and to begin operations at the new location."

The creation of Presentation Center began when the Sisters of the Presentation decided to build affordable housing on property they owned at the corner of Taylor and Ellis Streets. SteppingStone Executive Director Boardman worked with Mercy Housing to establish an ADHC Center in the building that had yet to be built. The creation of what would become Presentation Senior Housing was a decade long process involving many agencies and support from the City of San Francisco. In 2001, Presentation Center opened with John Tinloy transferring from Mabini to serve as Program Director. One of his first hires was Nicole Clause, a social worker, to be the Center’s Activity Coordinator. Nicole later became the Program Director, a position she still holds today.

Among those attending the first days of Presentation Center was Chin Fay Cheung, an 81-year-old resident of the building. She still attends the Center and last year celebrated her 100th birthday there.

"I had just moved into the building and began attending the Center to improve my health. I still enjoy the exercise classes very much, particularly using the gym equipment." Chin Fay Cheung, Presentation Center participant.

One of the traits of all SteppingStone Centers is that many staff members and program participants stay for years, creating a strong sense of community. Over 25% of SteppingStone staff have been with the agency for over a decade. Program participants stay on average four years, but some stay for much longer. The current Program Director of Mabini Center, Melissa MacDonald, noticed this when she began work at the Center several years ago.

"One of the things I noticed right away when I began work at Mabini was how many staff and participants had been there for a long time, some for decades. They had strong a sense of community, great pride in the work of the Center and real affection for each other. I think that this sense of being part of a group helps clients maintain their health and well-being.” Melissa MacDonald, Program Director, Mabini Center

One of the longtime employees at Mabini Center is Mei Chen, who began as a
Rehabilitation Aide in 1996 and has been the Center’s Activity Coordinator since 2004. Bilingual in Chinese and English, Mei helps clients stay engaged and connected to each other.

"For the participants, the Center is like their home and they really enjoy coming here to do daily activities and socialize. I think they would be bored and too isolated at home. Making friends, being with other same-age people and doing activities in a group makes them healthier and happier.

"I love working at Mabini because of the strong teamwork. The working principles of my colleagues have always been teamwork, communication and enthusiasm."
Mei Chen, Activity Coordinator Mabini Center

Over the last thirty years, Mabini Center has provided over 300,000 service days to hundreds of frail elders and adults with disabilities all of whom have health conditions so serious they are in danger of being forced into skilled nursing facilities. Presentation Center, a decade younger, has provided over 200,000 service days. The value these Centers provide is difficult to measure, but certainly more than simply the number of participants served. It is the quality of care provided, which for many participants goes far beyond health care alone.

"We had one participant who was estranged from her family tell us that she was so glad that she had found the Center because it meant some people would care if she became ill or died. She felt very alone at that point in her life and I am glad we were able to comfort her."
Nicole Clause, Program Director Presentation Center.

Clearly the need for these Centers will continue.

"I hope SteppingStone will continue to grow to meet the need of San Francisco’s growing senior population for adult day health care. The fact that fewer people are in skilled nursing facilities and more receiving adult day health care confirms our vision for the agency. We need to do even more."
Elizabeth Boardman, SteppingStone Executive Director 1989-2009

"I would like us to continue to focus on providing care to low-income, marginalized populations that need the help the most. The agency was created in the Tenderloin for that purpose and has remained true to our mission. I hope we always remember our roots."
John Tinloy, former Program Director Mabini, Presentation and Mission Creek Centers.

Photos: (Masthead) 2001 Presentation Center Staff. Seated: John Tinloy, Ana Luisa Gaytan, Nicole Clause, Simon Tse, Jodi Oronsky, Monvipa San Pietro, Dr. Dick Zercher, Standing: Linda Stewart, Fong Ren, Naomi Chau, Karen Lee, Yuliya Gribonos, Thomas Huynh, Dr. Westcott, Leonid Shkurko, Elizabeth Boardman
(1) Mabini Center under construction 1980s
(2) John Tinloy and Presentation staff 2000s
(3) Elizabeth Boardman and Annie 1990s
(4) Mayor Agnos and other dignitaries breaking ground for the Presentation Senior residences and adult day health care building (1991)
(5) Chin Fay Cheung, Presentation Center participant celebrating her 100th birthday
(6) Melissa MacDonald, Program Director, Mabini Center 2021
(7) Mei Chen, Activity Coordinator Mabini Center 2000s