



The folks behind Totally Vegan (left to right) Elnaquam Israel (Steven Heath), Vardah Israel and Tsitriyah Israel

## It's Easy Being Vegan

This south suburban company makes it easy for anyone to eat a vegan diet

BY BRETT MARLOW  
PHOTOS BY SONIA SPRAGG

About a year-and-a-half ago, 63-year-old Seretha Robinson, who lives in the southwest Chicago suburb of Matteson, Ill., lost her husband. For months, she sat home, not doing much. But last June, that all changed.

While visiting Heritage Health Food store in Country Club Hills, Ill., Robinson stumbled upon a man — Steven Heath — who was offering samples of food. The food was a raw carrot salad, one of many menu options a new home-delivery company based in Hazel Crest is offering in the Chicagoland area.

"I'm glad I ran into [Steven] and sampled the food. I was going to pick up one meal, but everything was gone. And here was Steven marching in with all his goodies, and he said 'Listen, I dropped this. There's nothing wrong with it, it's just mixed up but you can have it,'" says Robinson.

Although many restaurants offer vegetarian and vegan-friendly menus and items in the area, Totally Vegan serves up a twist by catering, delivering weekly meals to customers' homes and onto grocery store shelves that are ready to go and are exactly what their company name says — completely vegan.

Since sampling Totally Vegan's food, Robin-

son has been ordering the company's weekly meal plan — which costs about \$120, and come with seven lunches and seven dinners in microwavable containers, including such items as soy tacos, spinach quiche, soy meat lasagna, smoked seitan, or "wheat meat," dishes and green drinks for the morning.

"When I took it home, it was so delicious. It was the trio of the carrot salad, sunflower patte and kale. I always ask him to bring more of those because I love that one in particular," says Robinson.

Robinson, who has high blood pressure and cholesterol, asked Totally Vegan to prepare her meals without too much salt, as she's on a low-sodium diet. Since eating Heath's meals, which arrive each Monday morning, Robinson hasn't touched meat, and says she's feeling better.

"I get up every morning and walk my whole community and I'm not tired," Robinson says. "It used to take me 50 minutes, but now it is exactly 27 minutes." She has also joined a dance class, recently started bowling and bought a bicycle.

"I'm dancing now at 62 and joined a stepping class," Robinson says. "Before, I couldn't dance one record. My last class I was up five straight dances. I'm not aware sometimes of what I can do now."

Robinson's story is exactly what Totally Vegan is striving to accomplish — bring awareness to the vegan diet and the ways it can improve not only one's body, but also one's mind.

Totally Vegan was started in 2006 by Heath and his business partner, Vardah and cook, Tsitriyah Israel. Heath, who is 54, says that before he became involved in the company he felt his health was challenged and decided to make a change to eating a vegan diet.

"My cholesterol dropped from 289 to under 150," Heath says. "I lost 30 to 45 pounds, and it had such an impact on my life, I thought we needed to share this with the world."

Heath teamed up with a member of a Hebrew Israelite vegan community he belongs to which had spent 32 years visiting Israel and gathering vegan recipes from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America that the community incorporates into their foods.

"I purchased a building in Hazel Crest, which we turned into a production facility. I bought the equipment, bought a van, and got labeling, nutritional data, and Totally Vegan came to life," says Heath.

Totally Vegan focuses on people with health challenges and health-conscious eaters.

As a baby boomer himself, Heath realized that, at his age, it was time to change things he had been doing wrong in his life, like eating unhealthy foods. His eating habits changed from eating tasty foods, to foods that offer

## Where to find Totally Vegan:

» Visit [TotallyVegan.com](http://TotallyVegan.com)

» **Bonne Sante**, 1512 E. 53 St., Hyde Park, Chicago

» **Kramer's Health Foods**, 230 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago

» **Heritage Health Foods**, 4111 W. 183 St., Country Club Hills, IL

» **Bizio's Fresh Market**, 3446-50 Vollmer Rd., Flossmoor, IL

» **Kankakee Natural Foods**, 1035 Mulligan Dr., Kankakee, IL

### Treasure Island Foods

» 680 N. Lake Shore Dr., Chicago

» 1526 E. 55th St., Chicago

» 2121 N. Clybourn, Chicago



Some of Totally Vegan's delicious options include (clockwise from top left) BBQ bites; Lasagna with raw kale salad; Sunflower seed pâté on a plate surrounded by crackers; and the Whamburger!

the right nutrients, which the meals at Totally Vegan emphasize.

"Too many people my age are on prescription medication," Heath says. "We're getting our second wind now because we're becoming conscious."

Jennifer Vimbor, a registered dietitian at Nutrition Counseling Services in Chicago says, by eating a vegan, or plant-based diet, one's chances of developing heart disease and certain types of cancers decrease.

In addition, eating raw foods — which some items at Totally Vegan are — gives one all the nutrients from the foods compared to cooking or chopping them.

"Once you start to change the food, you're breaking down the nutrients," Vimbor says.

Vimbor adds that by eliminating animal-based foods from one's diet should decrease one's cholesterol levels, as well as bad cholesterol that comes from animal sources.

"If not, high cholesterol could be from a genetic predisposition," says Vimbor. She suggests eating whole grains such as oats that will help to bind onto cholesterol and get rid of it.

If you, like Robinson, decide to ditch meat for a vegan diet, Vimbor suggests seeing a dietitian or nutritionist first.

Whatever the case, Vimbor recommends eating a rainbow of colors to get nutrients and keep your diet balanced. And when it comes

to protein for vegans, get enough, but don't overdo it.

*"Eating a vegan diet is part of our culture; it's the expansion of our culture and an attempt to supply something people desperately need in today's culture."*

—Steven Heath

Eat foods like beans and tofu, and look for things with yeast or molasses to get your B12 vitamins, as an all-plant-based diet will not yield them. Vimbor also recommends eating good, fatty oils like sesame or canola, which help build one's immune system.

Although Heath's age prompted his dietary change, Robinson says she's seen interest in younger people, too. She has passed along the word, and even some meals, to her friends and their grandchildren. After tasting Totally Vegan's food, they have asked for more.

"Now that kids enjoy it, I think we should start introducing it to them and they'll have a healthier life," Robinson says.

But the vegan spirit is not just about health, it's also about not harming animals, too. Heath says he calls his meals "divine meals" because no blood was shed in their preparation.

In addition to managing the business side of the company, he lends his time to Soul Vegetarian on Chicago's South Side. Twice a month he serves on the floor and gives back to the vegan community to which he belongs.

"It's our contribution to the community to keep it going and to introduce people to a healthy vegan diet," Heath says.

Totally Vegan has endured some struggles since it opened. Some items and stores have suffered low sales and stopped selling at some locations. But Heath's plans are focused on the future. Within two years he hopes to start preparing everything with organic foods and hopes to expand his business.

In the meantime, Heath is focused on helping his community and business, by improving people's health.

"Eating a vegan diet is part of our culture; it's the expansion of our culture and an attempt to supply something people desperately need in today's culture." 🌱

*Brett Marlow is a recent journalism graduate from Columbia College Chicago who enjoys classic rock, a nice cold one and sitting on stoops while not writing, of course.*