

INTERVIEW PROFILE OF CRISTINE KELLY

You have been identified by friends and colleagues as one of our community's 50 top emerging sage leaders. A sage leader is a person who brings *unusual experience, sound judgment, and wisdom* in working to advance the civic well-being of our community.

- 1. To begin, how many years have you lived in Nevada County? Where in the county do you reside?**

I moved to Nevada County in 1993, so it's been 17 years. I now live in Grass Valley, but when my first husband and I moved here we lived in Penn Valley, in a trailer on horse property. Our daughter, Matisse, was born while living there. She likes to say she was born in a trailer down by the river!

- 2. May I ask how old you are? 46**
- 3. If you would, please share a bit about your personal history: where you grew-up; where you went to school and college; what organizations you have worked for and the positions you have held.**

I was born in Philadelphia, and lived there until I was eight, at which time we moved to Connecticut. I lived in an abusive family and left home at 16 to work on a horse farm. I had ridden horses for much of my life by that time, and they were my sanctuary away from family problems.

After a year of decompressing, I decided it was time for college. At 17 I moved to Boston and enrolled in night school at Harvard. I earned straight A's and actually matriculated to Harvard, but given my lack family support I felt conflicted and didn't have the discipline to continue. I was a good writer, but not a "studier." I took a semester off and worked at a restaurant in Cambridge, where there was a plethora of creative artists and writers. Then I enrolled in UMass in Boston. Where I came from had been an issue at Harvard; I felt I was always trying to be someone I wasn't. At UMass, with its urban demographics and sense of community, I felt more comfortable. I fell in love with philosophy and logic and developed a mentoring relationship with a professor whom I still stay in touch with. My writing bloomed, and I even contributed a few essays and poetry to some prestigious Boston area literary magazines.

Throughout this time, during and after college, I continued to work in the horse industry, training horses and teaching riding. Soon after college I met my future husband through mutual friends. He worked in art galleries and lived in New York. I moved there and began working in a major horse facility in Westchester

with such families as the (Calvin) Kleins and the Bloomborgs. I started a “Horses in the Hood” program that bused kids in from the Bronx to experience horses. The local community didn’t truly embrace the program, and there were many obstacles. I was 23 at the time and didn’t want to live in such a stratified society. That, combined with the collapse of the art business in the late 80’s, propelled my husband and I to get in our jeep and move to California.

We lived in San Francisco, and I worked with horses and people in Woodside. A couple of years later we found out we were going to have a baby. It didn’t take long to figure-out other areas that would be more affordable and conducive to raising a child. When I first visited the foothills, it was November and there was frost and wood smoke in the air. It reminded me of New England. So we moved to Penn Valley. My husband worked at Milhouse, and I built my horse business.

I have a great love of teaching people and helping them to become stronger. I still have contact with former students, and it is deeply gratifying to hear them talk of the impact of our relationship. After the birth of our second child I cut back on working and focused on my children and their schools, as my husband had started his own insurance agency. I became involved in the Charter Council, the Education Foundation, and the Capital Campaign for Yuba River Charter School. I felt increasingly drawn to service work. Then, several years ago, my husband and I divorced. As difficult as it was, divorce served as sort of a launching pad. All of a sudden, I needed a full time job.

I applied, interviewed, and was hired as a Communications Director of the Ama Foundation (fundraising for AmaGhar – a Nepalese refuge program and facility) and eventually became the Executive Director. The work was challenging but very gratifying, and I was proud to have led the organization from a single service program to becoming more of an umbrella agency for several social service efforts in Nepal. The organization grew increasingly fiscally sound, but the board was divided over direction. I didn’t want to become the triangulation point and decided to resign, without any immediate job prospects at the time. I stopped working in January 2009, and in February began my current position as Executive Director of the Sierra Mentoring Partnership.

4. Is there a history of community service in your family background? If so, briefly describe it.

There wasn’t a tradition of community service in my family. My grandparents were all immigrants. My maternal grandmother emigrated from Russia and spoke four Eastern European languages. She volunteered as a translator for people just coming over, but that was the only community service I am aware of in my family.

5. What do you consider to be the major strengths and capabilities that have made you an effective civic community leader? Are they rooted in action, in your personal style, in your organizational, political, and personal relationships, or in something else?

I think the heart of my leadership is compassion. I've seen so much in my family, sad things happening to people I loved. I am fascinated by the failings and possibilities of human beings, and I have an underlying strong belief in the goodness of humanity. I always try to look at something with a multi-faceted view, to understand the multiple perspectives, in any situation. When I was younger I was more strident, with strong political views. Now I'm more accepting of others. Everyone has a story, and I try to keep that in mind. I respect where people are coming from and try to learn something from every situation I encounter.

I also have a strong will. That got me through many difficult situations and was responsible for a lot of success, and particularly when I was younger I relied on it. Now, however, I know that will alone will not get me through everything, and that some of that will in my past was based on fear. I've learned to let go of some fear and to embrace my own self and shortcomings. That's allowed me to be more open. I believe we all need to work together, and I need to be an example of that. I try to combine my passion with diplomacy, and really listen. I think there is an inherent human need to be heard.

Early on, I had an ability to observe what was needed in a situation and become that. Also, it helps if people in leadership positions are intelligent, well-spoken, and comfortable in social situations. When people ask me how I've gotten where I am, I joke that I'm really just a pretty girl with a large vocabulary! Overall, I think my strengths are rooted in personal experience. I have a deep belief in the good side of human nature, though I've also seen the destructive side. It's my duty and obligation, if I have the strength and capacity, to make a positive difference. I am the only survivor in my family. There must be a reason why I am here, and I believe it's to help others, whether to facilitate that in an organization, or personally with my actions.

6. There are five key roles that civic leaders often play in their community:

- ***Mentor:* teaching and engaging others**
- ***Mediator:* helping to resolve conflict**
- ***Monitor:* serving as a community watchdog**
- ***Mobilizer:* working to bring about change**
- ***Motivator:* urging people to pursue worthy goals**

As you think about your own civic involvement in our community, which of

these roles have you played and which do you consider to be your strongest?

I've actually been most of those at one time or another. Mentor is probably my strongest or most frequent role. I can be a great motivator, and I've also been a mediator. Currently, I see myself moving more toward the role of mobilizer/agent of change role.

7. This project has to do with the involvement of sage leaders like yourself in civic organizations that seek to improve the quality of life and well-being of Grass Valley and Nevada City. This includes nine types of civic organization:

- Fraternal and service clubs
- Social services organizations
- Educational organizations
- Governmental and political organizations
- Arts organizations
- Media organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Environmental organizations
- Other nonprofit organizations

In which of the nine types of civic organizations on the list are you *currently* involved? Overall, how many total hours a month do you give to these organizations?

I work or have worked in educational organizations, other non-profits, and environmental organizations, and now work in the arts. I'm working as the executive director of a classical music organization, which is a 40-hour a week commitment. I volunteer at school a few hours every month and am an active member of several area non-profits. Outside of work, those total about 10-15 hours per month.

8. What is the name of the *one* organization on the list in which you are most involved and committed? Were you invited to become involved or did you approach the organization(s) and volunteer your services? Are you paid or unpaid? On average, how many hours a month do you give to this organization or organizations?

I'm the Executive Director of Music in the Mountains (MIM). I competed for the job and got it! Obviously, I'm paid. I work about 40-50 hours a week in this position.

9. I'd like to learn more about your involvement in this organization:

First, describe the leadership role that you play.

It's exciting taking an organization that has been around for 30+ years and taking it through a renaissance. I am learning tremendously from past leadership, and get to play a strong role in the organization's future. I'm a person who likes to bring people together, and I have a very good "big picture" outlook. I'm very comfortable calling-up anyone and asking, "Can you educate me on this?" or "What do you think?"

Second, in what ways do you believe you have *most* helped the organization?

I think I am helping to break down the perceived barriers between classical music and the general public. I've given a strong voice to our education programs, and spearheaded a new communications model that focuses on social media. I'm also bringing my background in collaboration to the table. Basically, I am building a bridge between the organization's past and it's future.

Third, as you think back over your involvement in the organization, what *roadblocks* have been most challenging?

As a classical music organization, we are now charged with creating and developing our audience through education. The genre of classical music takes more time, understanding and appreciation. And, we need to get the music out of the performance hall and make it more accessible. But orchestra music is expensive to produce.

Fourth, what experiences within the organization have given you the *most* meaning and satisfaction?

The most satisfying part of the job involves leading the organization to become more deeply engaged with the whole community it serves. We had a tremendous summer festival where we had many people who had never come to one of our concerts before, and they had a terrific time.

10. I want to ask you three additional questions about your various community involvements:

First, what motivates or inspires you to engage in civic activities and causes?

I'm very excited and interested in creating sustainable communities. This area

(Nevada County) is a wonderful petrie dish. We've done work trying to create a sustainable economy, done work trying to create sustainable agriculture. What about sustainable social systems? There's lots of possibility here.

Second, do you feel that you are sacrificing anything in your life by being deeply involved in our community's civic organizations?

In my current position I'm sacrificing some and gaining some. I work at trying to achieve balance. I've sacrificed my writing, and I haven't played the cello in years. I do believe, though, there is a time in life for each of these facets of ourselves. Maybe when I'm sixty I can write again and join the orchestra.

Third, what personal benefits do you get from your civic involvements?

I'm gaining a lot of personal satisfaction. I love being part of a community, and working towards the creation of something larger than myself.

11. Let's turn to a different topic: Is there a relationship between your role as a working professional and your personal involvement in our community's civic organizations? If so, how would you describe it?

It's the same. I'm passionate about all of the other causes and organizations I become involved with.

12. Do you see yourself continuing along the same career path with increasing responsibilities and leadership roles? Or at some point do you see a different path for yourself?

Yes, I see myself continuing in this career path. I'm still trying to figure out where I'm strongest, and how to utilize my strengths. I just moved into this position and plan on being here for awhile. I have some ambition in working toward a community foundation in this region. Hmm... or will I be a writer in the desert?

13. One of the benefits of growing older is that we are increasingly able to reflect on our experiences and learn from them. Have you found any patterns of personal behavior no longer useful in your leadership role? Is so, what are these and how have you changed?

Yes. As I answered above, my will has been a driving force in my life, and thus in my work. I used to rely on that intense commitment to success to achieve whatever was necessary given the situation. This was the case certainly when I was in business for myself. I would work harder, longer, smarter, learn more, go the extra mile in order to achieve success. Over the years, and certainly with my

divorce, I realized that I could not always control a situation and bend it to my will. It was a good lesson for me. I came to understand that I could never achieve that perfection I always seemed to be in pursuit of. Not only could I not achieve it, but perhaps that's not the point.

My resignation from the Ama Foundation is an example of this shift. I came to see that although I brought the organization to a wholly new level, I needed to step away and let the board choose direction, rather than push my vision. It was sad to leave what I thought was "my" work, but really, it is the organization and its mission that is the work. I've divested myself of equating personal achievement with organizational success.

14. What leadership qualities do you most admire in effective leaders that you have known?

I think I most admire patience, and the quality of communicating support and belief in a person... the ability to listen to all sides, to honor where people are coming from. I worked with George Hoffeecker in the area of Appreciative Inquiry – which is a strength-based perspective as opposed to a deficit-based approach in promoting positive change. I admire leaders who always remain focused on a goal but not at the expense of the people around them.

Which of these qualities do you believe best describe your leadership?

The ability to see an issue from all angles. Actually, I'd like to develop more patience and the ability to delegate more in a way that says, "I know you can contribute."

15. What, if any, spiritual traditions or practices do you most draw upon in exercising leadership?

I consider myself non-denominational. I was involved with the Unitarian Universalist community in San Francisco and keep meaning to get myself to become more involved here, but I don't seem to find it a priority right now. I draw upon the spiritual traditions of many communities. I think religion goes wrong wherever humanity isn't held to be sacred.

16. How has your leadership style changed as you have progressed in your career?

I am becoming a better listener. I'm striving to become more focused and attentive. I have had a tendency to take on too much and be a little scattered as a result.

17. What is the one mistake you see leaders making more frequently than others?

We all have a tendency to take on too much, leading to burn out – not addressing our own needs.

18. What are you doing to continue growing and developing as a leader?

I continue to educate myself. I see my career as an education. This is like graduate school! I have a curiosity about things and often ask myself, “How can I do this better?”

19. What are the one or two peak experiences that set you on the path you’re on today?

When I was about 11 or so I was taking riding lessons. My family paid for the lessons at first, but then things fell apart. (My dad was a violent alcoholic.) My teacher understood some of my situation and would give me horses to ride at no cost. One day we were on a trail ride with a small group, and my horse ran away with me. It reared up, ran up to the top of the hill, and reared up again. Then it came charging back down. I was hanging on with all my might, doing everything I could to stay on and get control of the horse. As the horse came back down the hill, we headed toward the group and actually stopped in front of them. I’m trembling, the horse is trembling. Then I saw my teacher. She looked concerned but was laughing. She looked at me and said, “You will always be able to ride it.” She was telling me that I will always be OK, always be in control. She knew I was going to make it, despite any challenge.

Those experiences where someone says, “I believe in you,” (my philosophy professor) or “I’m going to take a chance on you” (my first non-profit ED position with the Ama Foundation) - when someone sees something in me or says, “You’ve got what it takes” – those experiences are huge. It only takes a few people in your life who say that to make a profound difference. I always want to be that for someone, because I remember those few people who have been that for me. And that makes me work hard to fulfill their belief in me.

20. As you look back over your life what would you do differently?

I don’t think there is much I would do differently, although I sometimes wonder whether foregoing graduate school will affect my career opportunities in non-profit management. Perhaps this is where my will can make up the difference!

- 21. The three characteristics most often associated with sage leadership are *unusual experience, sound judgment, and wisdom*. What does having wisdom mean to you?**

Reinhold Niebuhr said it best: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. He was a wise man. For me, wisdom embodies a wide variety of characteristics open-mindedness, patience, receptivity, clarity of thought, creativity and adaptability. Wisdom grants me the capacity to look squarely at a situation, respect the diverse perspectives of its participants, and hopefully offer a direction for positive change.

- 22. You probably know other individuals who have emerging sage leadership Talents and skills but are not currently involved in the public life of our community. Why do you believe they choose to be uninvolved? What might be done to encourage their involvement?**

People give where and when they can. Many young people here are concentrating on raising their families, and family takes precedence. Often times they may be working in smaller microcosms and not be seen as heavily involved in civic life. For example, lots of people donate time and efforts to their children's schools. It's important to recognize that many people are contributing to their communities by raising good, healthy families.

I've been looking at the age group between 18 and 24, and wondering how to engage them. We're not really teaching them that path or giving them tools, and we need to find a way for them to be engaged. Young people don't feel they have anything to give, or don't know how to give it if they do. Engaging them with their preferred mediums for connecting could be a good start, such as designing more interactive web platforms and utilizing social networking to build momentum.

- 23. One final question: It is often said that the quality of life in our community is highly attractive and unusual. Do you believe this to be true? (If yes): What are the three or four things about our community that you most value and make you want to continue living here?**

Yes, this is an exceptional community. I love the openness to experimentation. There's also a strong tie to the environment and a strong desire to care for it – a real love for the physical beauty of this place. The arts and culture for such a small community are phenomenal, and my daughter has been a recipient of some fine music education and opportunities here. There's also a desire to tend to our youth and children – a strong sense of “it takes a village...” It's a great place to raise

children, but I worry that it's a little homogenous. Overall, it's a really healthy environment.

24. Is there anything else you'd like to say or ask as we close?

No, I think we've covered plenty!

Many thanks for your time and insights. This has been a great interview!