

## INTERVIEW PROFILE OF SENIOR SAGE LEADER BARBARA THOMAS

February 24, 2010

**You have been identified by friends and colleagues as one of our community's 50 top senior 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, and where do you reside?**

My husband and I moved to Rough and Ready five years ago.

- 2. Are you working, semi-retired, or retired...And how old you will be on your next birthday?**

I am 69 years old now.

- 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 grew-up in the San Francisco Bay area, and except for a short time back East went to grammar school and high school in Menlo Park. I was active as a leader in school clubs and social activities. I had planned on attending the University of Oregon but became pregnant and in the process of raising children was never able to go to college, something that has haunted me over my lifetime. However, like many women of that era, I helped my husband get a university education.

After raising my children, I entered the workforce for the first time in 1989 at age 49. My first position was as director of development for a Bay Area high tech non-profit organization that was concerned about the use of nuclear weapons to resolve conflicts. I stayed for two years and left to make more money. I then moved to a part-time position in the public relations department of a Sunnyvale high tech firm. When the company decided to pare down its workforce, I got let go, then re-hired two months later in a full-time position. I was there for two years but had numerous run-ins with my boss and left to join a new public relations agency that had been founded to promote Internet companies. I was eventually given the job of hiring young people who were well-grounded in technology. This resulted in my helping to grow the company from 12 to 95 employees. Unfortunately, one of my bosses was a very difficult person to work with—something that everyone in the firm knew and had experienced. I thought I could handle the situation, but our relationship deteriorated and I was eventually fired. Fortunately, I was able to leave with a

generous compensation package. I believe my departures from the two positions enabled me to gain an inner security to know that I could respect my own feelings and insights and not be beholden to the circumstances surrounding me and my life.

My having been fired was the best thing that could have happened to me because it catapulted me into the next arena. While on my own, I met a woman who wanted to partner with me in creating a new San Francisco start-up. We decided that she would manage the firm and I would hire employees for it and take on training of our new hires. Our new firm then merged with a huge company in Chicago. I became part of the marketing/public relations operation, which was based in Salt Lake City, but worked in San Francisco. Eventually, due to my partner's departure, I found the work too stressful because I was managing both the operations and the hiring, training, and firing of staff. I resigned in favor of another person assuming my responsibilities, but I remained there as a consultant. Shortly thereafter the parent company went bankrupt, and my husband and I decided to retire to the Redding area. Then five years ago we moved here.

**4. Is there a history of community service in your family background? Briefly, how would you describe it?**

My mother was very involved in PTA, but her main focus was Stanford Children's Hospital, which is now called Lucille Packard Children's Hospital. She raised funds and led special events. Her main motivation was not so much wanting to give something back to the community as it was doing something for herself, something that was personally satisfying. This became a model for my own volunteer work. Also, my father was very active in both the Masons and Shriners in San Francisco for many years.

**5. What do you consider to be the principal 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 have the ability to be a quick study of people and decide whether to connect with them or not. I can immediately determine whether I'd like to get to know the person, or if the person possesses something important that I'd like to learn. I guess this came from all of the hiring I did in one of my early Bay Area jobs. I got to be very good at assessing people's strengths and weaknesses and at making "yes" or "no" decisions on whether to hire.

In thinking about my principal leadership strengths, I believe I have a good balance among personal style, ability to build relationships, and political capability. And all of this is rooted in action. Of these, building personal relationships is most important to me and probably best defines my leadership style.

**6. There are five key roles that civic leaders often play in their community. (Hand-out list and read):**

- ***Mentor*: teaching and engaging the young**
- ***Mediator*: helping to resolve community conflict**
- ***Monitor*: serving as a public watchdog**
- ***Mobilizer*: working to bring about social change**
- ***Motivator*: urging people toward public good and away from self-interest**

**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?**

My principal civic role here is in mentoring young people. There is one young woman in particular whose mother had been killed in an automobile crash. I helped to mentor her through her grieving process and our relationship continues to this day. I have also been involved in two other civic roles: as a mobilizer to bring about social change and as motivator to urge people toward public good and away from self-interest.

**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 organizations. (Hand-out and read):**

- **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've been involved in two types of civic organization: educational/social services and arts. I give about 60 hours a month to these organizations.

**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 and volunteer your services? Are you paid or unpaid? On average, how many hours a month do you give to this organization?**

My current passion is an organization that helps young girls. Initially, the executive director invited me to lunch and said she was starting a marketing team for the organization. She asked me to head the team, and I agreed. From there I got involved in mentoring the girls. This organization draws on the lion's share of the 60 hours a month that I give to volunteer work.

- 9. I'd like to learn more about your involvement in this organization by asking four questions: First, describe the leadership role that you play within the organization. Second, in what ways do you believe you have *most* helped the organization? Third, as you think back over your involvement in the organization, what *roadblocks* have been most challenging? Fourth, what experiences within the organization have given you the *most* meaning and satisfaction?**

My principal leadership role is serving as Board President. I work closely with the Executive Director and talk through a variety of organizational issues with her on a regular basis. I also try to bring good spirit and attitude to the internal organization when I visit with staff. Much of my time is given to motivating individual board members and building a personal relationship with each of them.

I believe I most help the organization by supporting and nurturing the Executive Director—especially letting her know when she is doing a good job and listening carefully and caringly when she is troubled. She and I have weathered some real storms lately, especially involving a board member who was asked to leave. I spend a great deal of time reading how the board and staff work together and believe I bring a certain level of maturity to the organization's climate. I don't view myself as being the center of anything. I simply see that things need to get done and jump in and do them with the help of others.

Most of the roadblocks I have experienced in the organization have to do with myself. Historically, success is very important to me and failure is to be avoided at all costs. Being up front and center is not my favorite thing to do, although I have done a lot of it. I don't like personal attention. I simply want to put it out there and get everyone involved in getting things done. So I constantly check myself and let the "me" in me take over.

The most meaningful experience in the organization has come from the mentoring I have done with a young girl. Knowing that she won't end up like her mother is gratifying. In a way, her mother's passing was a blessing in some respect because she and her brother now have a chance to live a good and productive life. Mentoring

the Executive Director has also been satisfying. The ED and I trust one another and work at helping and learning from each another. So overall, my mentoring is the most meaningful thing I have experienced in the organization.

**10. I want to ask you four additional questions about your civic life:**

**What motivates or inspires you to engage in civic activities and causes?**

What motivates me to engage in civic activities is the desire to continue building my life and learning from every situation that I can. And part of this is having a life within the community in which I live. My husband and I learned this in spades when we spent a period of time volunteering in another state to work on an important project. Our goal was to engage the state and change the way the people there thought about an important social issue. We learned how to penetrate small towns and large cities and found that getting involved can be very rewarding and satisfying. So being in a community and being involved in it is part of having a whole life. If you're not involved, your whole life can pass you by. You want to be able to get to our age and be able to say, "What have I done with this life of mine?" "What difference has my life made?" "Is it good enough to have satisfied just myself?" No. A friend used to tell me that if you don't get involved, you'll never know the answers to these questions. Just open the door and walk through.

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

I don't feel that I am sacrificing anything important in my life by being engaged in my civic organizations. Yes, there are small irritations—for example, not seeing friends in the Bay Area as often as we'd like because we have commitments here. But that is part of what having a life in our community means. Sure there is lots to do, but somehow it all manages to get done.

**What personal benefits do you get from your civic involvements?**

With regard to the personal benefits that I receive from my civic engagements, a sense of well-being, a sense of contributing, and a sense of giving back head the list. I really don't know how my life could be lived without these involvements and commitments. I've been doing this stuff since I was a kid and don't know any other way to function. I also know something about myself: It's not what I do or the accolades I receive that counts but who I am, my core being, that feeds me. This is one of my major life learnings.

**11. 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?**

There are two patterns of behavior that used to dominate my leadership style and now, thank god, don't. In my early life I used to do things because I thought I *should*. I was dominated by "shoulds" and the implicit fear that my personal worth was tied to doing them. No more. Now I do only what I want to do, and this is very liberating. I also used to think that I had to do everything by myself. Now I gladly ask for help and receive it, and this is also very liberating. The key learning is that we aren't put on the planet to be alone.

**12. What leadership qualities do you most admire in effective leaders that you have known? Which of these qualities do you believe best describe your leadership?**

I had a friend in another state, now deceased, who used to be head of the Republican Party nationwide. Our political views couldn't have been more different but we came to envelope one another, looking forward to our time together. She taught me a lot about being open to possibility and to appreciate other people's point of view. I learned much about nurturing and mentoring from her, and that if I want to bring people to a particularly point of view it's important to learn not just what they think but *how* they think. This is a wonderful leadership quality to nurture.

Regarding my own leadership qualities, a number come to mind: asking big questions, listening carefully to others, trying to glean the truth from a situation, and if truth is elusive to ask more questions. Once again, the quality of verifying the thinking of others. Even though I had been in leadership roles all of my life, I had not thought of myself as a leader until I began to observe other leaders very carefully and discover that I am much like them. This took a long time. A lot of this came from my dad, who was a highly successful business leader. I watched him as an executive and saw he was a good role model.

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

Most of my learnings about spiritual traditions came about through my extensive study of my own self over the years. When my husband and I were in our early 30s we knew nothing about ourselves. Indeed, we had returned from three years in Europe to discover that our relationship was troubled and needed repair. So friends of ours got us involved in an organization that sponsored a variety of projects, including the nuclear issue, solving conflict without going to war, and the sustainability of our planet. As our experience in the organization unfolded, we found that it was entirely based on the principals of Jesus as a wisdom teacher. And that started our quest to understand who we were by looking at what Jesus and the

Bible say are important guides to living our life. With others in the organization we did things like celebrate Passover, explore the Enneagram, and study the beauty and truths of various religious traditions. And by reading and discussing in small groups Eric Erikson, Robert Bly, Jung, and Freud—all great teachers who have made extraordinary contributions to our understanding of the human psyche—we were able to engage in a psychological inquiry about who we were as individuals, what drives us. We did this for 20 years, and I continue to draw on this experience in musing about such questions as “What would Jesus do in this situation?” “What are my areas of darkness, and how do I bring them to light?” Answers to such questions come from the great spiritual leaders, and there really is nothing new. It has all been set in time in the greater cosmos.

**14. How has your leadership style changed as you have progressed in life?**

In a nutshell, the greatest change in my leadership style was the shift from being fearful and lacking dynamism to being able to get myself out in the world with knowledge and confidence. When we used to lead groups in our home I was terrified because I thought they knew more than I did, when in reality they didn't. And even if they did, well, that's part of the learning process. Now, with greater confidence in myself I am able to lead by contacting other people to see what they think and believe should be done, and then pull things together to get the best solutions.

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

The greatest common mistake that leaders make is getting too self-absorbed. They love to hear themselves talk and come to believe that they are the be-all and end-all. I guess this is about hubris, excessive pride and ambition. That said, I try not to be too harsh in judging this kind of leader because “There but for the grace of god go I.” One of my greatest faults over the years has been a high need to try to fix situations or people. I've learned that if anything has changed about myself, it's that I don't do this any more.

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

One of the best ways that I continue to grow and develop as a leader is through reading. For example, I am now reading *From Aging to Saging*, a great source of affirmation and confirmation balanced by the fact that the book brings a new dimension to my thinking.

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

Wisdom is the ability to see a situation and be able to sit back and ask the question, “What do I know about this?” and “What don’t I know?” and “If I don’t know, where and how am I going to find out?” Wisdom also has to do with feeling good enough about oneself to be able to say, “I don’t know” rather than “I know everything.” There is no way of knowing everything on our own. We need to read and get out in the community and ask questions. If we stop learning, we wither away. Life experiences have enabled me to challenge myself to ask the hard question of myself: Do I really want to be in a situation? And if not why not? Wisdom is knowing when you need help, and where to go for it, and how to do that without feeling or being defensive. Finally, I have been fortunate to have known people along the way who had wisdom. This has empowered me to want to pass on what I have learned to others, when asked.

**18. What are the one or two peak experiences in your life that set you on the path you’re on today?**

I have had three peak experiences that changed my life and resulted from my husband and me being involved in the before-mentioned organization that sponsored a variety of projects, including the nuclear issue, solving conflict without going to war, and the sustainability of our planet. The first, of course, was engaging in in-depth study of the great spiritual wisdom teachers and routinely applying their principles to my own life. The second culminated in our volunteer work in another state on a critical social issue. I learned leadership by going into towns and cities and getting CEOs and others engaged in organizing and fund raising. We pulled off an amazing experience at a Convention Center in that state, and I was MC. During our four years there I had many experiences with national media personalities. Yet a third peak experience is that I become president of a year-long project for girls who had graduated from high school and were taking a year off before going to college to learn how to think and discern how to put together a program and go out and sell it. My husband and I lived in a home with 12 girls for a year. Our role was to serve as teachers, and the girls learned how to cook, organize, budget, get along, and run and clean a house. These were bright middle class kids from good homes, and the program impacted me greatly. During that year I experienced a depression that I had to deal with, without pulling everyone else down with me. It didn’t take long to realize I had strength and energy and lots of love and support. And now as Board President of an organization that serves young girls, I find this to be another peak leadership experience.

**19. You probably know other individuals who have sage leadership talents and skills but are not currently involved in the civic life of our community. Why do you believe they choose to be uninvolved? What, if anything, might be done to get them engaged?**

I really don't know many people like that because my husband and I tend to associate mostly with those who are greatly engaged in voluntary community service. I expect there are a number of reasons some people do otherwise. Sometimes they feel they have been so busy all of their lives making a living that it is now their time to do as they please. Then there are those who simply don't want to be responsible for anything any more except their own time and lives. But I expect the larger reason is that some of these people simply haven't found their passion in this stage of life. They need for something to click on, for there to be a spark that links an organization's mission and their passion in ways that compel them to become involved. Passion and the quest for knowledge, the survival quotient.

- 20. 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?**

I have lived in 21 different places in my life, including other countries and states. There simply is no other place we want to live than here. Most people we know are well-educated and broad-minded. They genuinely care for each other and pull together when there is need to do so, and this is especially important at our age. I'm also enormously impressed that we have terrific young mayors for our two towns, and Women of Worth and Gathering of Women that do things for the whole community. We also have great beauty and recreational opportunities here. Our arts organizations are superb, as are a number of restaurants. The only thing I am not impressed with is the old history of the tension between Grass Valley (blue collar) and Nevada City (where the managers lived). The more interdependence and collaboration between the two the better. I think this is happening in many arenas.

- 21. Do you have anything else to add as we conclude?**

No. Thank you.