

Histories of the 50 Emerging Sage Leaders

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My grandmother always helped people and had a saying that greatly influenced me to this day: “Always give more than you take and your life will be full.” Emerging Sage Leader

The 50 emerging sage leaders range in age from 27 to 55, with the average being 42. Two-thirds are women. In terms of generational characteristics, about one-quarter belong to the Baby Boomer Generation, two-thirds belong to Generation X, and less than ten percent to Millennials, or Generation Y.

Six emerging sage leaders were born out-of-state (Washington State, Montana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York), but most are native Californians. The largest number grew-up in Nevada County—particularly Grass Valley and Nevada City—and one is a 5th generation legacy. Many others experienced their childhood years in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. About half live today in Nevada City and a third in Grass Valley.

Six emerging sage leaders come from blue collar backgrounds, and the rest were raised in homes where one or both parents had professional careers. One was from a privileged background in New York City and her parents had a summer home in Woodstock, while another grew-up in a camping cabin on the South Yuba River without running water or electricity. Most had an intact, supportive family life that imparted solid values during their formative years, but one shared stories of a childhood so surrounded by dysfunction and abuse that early emancipation at the age of 16 was her best option. Two had a mother working part or full-time, while others had a stay-at-home mom. And almost all report much or some history of community service in their family background:

My grandfather, who lived with us as I was growing up, was a labor organizer. I think that was where I formed my ideas about social justice, including the idea that you can fight back and have some effect.

As a 5th generation Nevada County person, my ancestors seemed always to be involved in community organizations such as the Elks, Soroptimist, and the Ladies Relief Society. And my parents have been members of the Grass Valley Sportsman's Club and California Fish and Game Commission.

Most emerging sages attended traditional public elementary and secondary schools, but some were home-schooled and others attended private schools. Virtually all earned either a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree—a significantly higher level of education attainment than most of their counterparts in Western Nevada County. Many attended more than one undergraduate institution, and one shifted among eight colleges before getting his bachelor's degree. Ten earned a master's degree, ten also earned a Ph. D. or other advanced graduate degree, and one is currently pursuing a Ph. D. Others are actively involved in continuing education, although not necessarily in pursuit of a degree. Forty-three attended college at a wide range of California public and private institutions, and seven graduated from colleges and universities in other states: Nevada, Nebraska, Montana, Colorado, Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts.

Most emerging sage leaders lived in multiple communities during their childhood, and 12 had life-defining international experiences. Some of the emerging sages worked in the Peace Corps in Russia and Honduras, the American Refugee Committee health program in Malawi, Africa, the Seeds of Learning Program in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and as a bicycle tour guide in Italy. Others studied abroad in Costa Rica, Brazil, Spain, Italy, and Germany while a few simply traveled to such countries as Cyprus, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. And one lived as a child in Geneva, Switzerland. These young leaders say their international experiences gave them a global perspective on which to base their lives.

Most emerging sages have had the shared experience of career opportunities revealing themselves rather than resulting from a linear pursuit of a particular job or employment objective. And few ended-up in careers that they had prepared for in college. One served in the military before successfully running a family business at the age of 30 and then discovering a career in Nevada County civil service. Several did tutoring and mentoring before landing on a career choice. One worked on upwards of 50 high level political campaigns for such prominent figures as Jerry Brown and Bill Clinton before embracing the environmental movement. Another had a career in sales and then in aviation and government until moving to Nevada County, where she started an executive coaching practice. Still another was in education and nonprofit management and now primarily volunteers and takes contract jobs with nonprofits. One did a variety of things professionally for nonprofits, including capital campaigns, and then started her own business when she moved to Nevada City. And one was an equestrian and trained horses until happening upon the solar industry and sustainability issues.

While the 50 emerging sage leaders have adapted to changes in career paths, they did so with intentionality and an expectation of success. Almost all are currently employed full-time, and most have had multiple years of experience in their current position or in positions related to the one they presently hold. Sixteen are employed by city, county, or state government, and 16 are employed in non-profit management. Five are teachers or educational administrators and nine are in other occupations such as journalism, medicine, small business, architecture, construction, and the county court. Most have had an increase in responsibilities over time and hold high positions in their organizations, including superior court judge, district school superintendent, principal, nonprofit executive director, program manager, chief financial officer, and owner/partner. Because almost all emerging sage leaders are involved full-time in the workplace, they were asked if they saw themselves continuing in the same career—but with increasing responsibilities and leadership roles. Or whether at some point they would choose a different career path. All see themselves continuing to evolve personally and professionally, and about half report they will continue with their current career:

I believe I'll be doing commercial and residential construction for the rest of my life. And it is something that I love. My roles are likely to change, however. Before too long I will

be an owner of a company, but managing construction projects and helping with entitlements and development will always be something I do. I have a business background and would love to do other ventures on the side, but my primary role will be construction management.

I see myself continuing my career path, focused on working with our community to better meet the health and human service needs of our low income, underserved populations. And helping to strengthen our nonprofit sector so it can be a better and stronger partner.

I'm in touch with who I am, and it is not time to pursue other professional leadership roles. I don't feel I have enough to offer to a large high school district because that's a huge responsibility, and I am not there yet. I also have a son leaving for college, and I want to be available and supportive of him. I'm not a person who has to have the "Top Dog" job. I'm very team-oriented, so I feel fine making my boss look good without that person even knowing it.

I definitely see myself on the same career path. I've gone from employee to independent contractor to business owner. As a business owner, I started working one-on-one, then went into group workshops, and now have speaking engagements and book writing and promotion. I do see increasing responsibilities for myself, in that my current business only supports me. But in the future I'll bring in other people as contractors or employees.

This is where I have to weigh the needs of my family and the needs of my career. Personally, I'm here to stay. Potential opportunities to go elsewhere have come up, but I want my family to stay here and be together. I'd be happy to remain here the rest of my life.

Earlier in my professional life I had more responsibilities and found myself in leadership roles in organizations that were much larger than the ones I'm involved in here. Although my work now is more project and volunteer-based, and the breadth of my

responsibilities is narrower, I still feel this is my life path and that I've grown and developed as a leader.

A number of emerging sages are uncertain whether the path they are now on will change:

I realize that no matter how hard I think I am on a certain path, I may not end up there. You ride the train as long as you can and hopefully, if that one stops, another one comes by. My grandmother is still alive, and listening to her stories, it's like you are never in the place you thought you were going to be. When I was ten, I thought life was going to be a certain way when I got to 16. But when I turned 16, it wasn't like that at all. As you get older, you are really never in the place you thought you were going to be when you were younger. So this is exciting new stuff, and we're happy and thankful to be here.

I definitely have a path that I'm on, but I'm just not sure where it's going. I've been asked to do some consulting work to set-up charter schools, and although this didn't fit into my life at the time, I could see that as a future possibility. I also sent my resume into the Obama Administration for Undersecretary of School Innovation, so while I plan to stay in education, I'm just not quite sure where that will take me.

I'm nearing the latter part of my career. For any position I've ever had, I've been very candid in saying there are three criteria that are important for me to continue in my role. One is my happiness and enjoyment of the work that I do. I'm very fortunate that I can count on one hand the number of times I haven't wanted to go to work. The second criterion is that I continue to make a difference to the organization and am productive in my work. Finally, it's important that others see me as a positive force in my role and are able and willing to support me. As to what I might do next, I don't know. If and when I leave my current position, I think I will be open to whatever feels right at that time.

However, many emerging sages do see their career and life paths changing:

Oh, I see a different path. I see probably five or so more years here, and then it's time for someone else. Not only may I have worn-out my welcome by saying "no" to too many people, but an organization benefits from having a change of leadership. So in the relatively near future, both I and the county organization will benefit from me moving on.

Yes. I will continue doing this, and it's really important to feel I'm connected and giving back to the community. But I eventually want to return to art. It's a piece of me that I'm somewhat able to fulfill doing design and illustration, but I want to go back to fine art. I'm about to have baby, so I'm not sure when I will get back to it. But someday I will.

I do see a different path, mainly due to continuing budget reductions in the funding agency that I head. The other day was graduation for the preschool in my building, which serves children with severe disabilities. I went in and started playing with the kids when a very small guy, who is a fighter, backed-up and put himself on my lap. The teacher said he didn't do that with anyone, and she invited me to come back every day. When I think about my talents and strengths, I believe that my ability to connect with kids is number one, even though I don't use it in the work I currently do. Looking back, I've thought my development has been a direct line, but it now feels much looser than that. I don't know what the future holds, but I'm curious to see.

I'm probably moving more and more back into consulting again. I've learned so much from being with the health department, and I'd like to see myself helping other organizations with their planning. I can't not be involved in community wellness. I'm working a lot in the disability field right now.

In the future, I see myself as a writer. This may mean making movies, or continuing more heavily in the project I started. I don't know just what or when, but I am certain I will pull away from my civic engagements to make room for serious writing when the time comes.

I don't see myself on a career trajectory. I work where I see a need and feel engagement in the issues. At some point, I'd like to open a bakery with a literary non-profit organization associated with it. We're at a point where we all need to wake-up and get on our path.

I made a decision a long time ago that having a stable environment for raising our children was more important than personal ambition. I've had a nice long run in education and retired last summer. I see retirement more as a time to address the question, "What am I on this earth for?" more than just taking time to play. To balance my life, I could see myself exploring a different type of creativity. I'd like to take on a challenge and do something I've never done before, like building a garage— even though it would probably cost twice as much and be half as good. I will always be drawn to supporting the community in some way. Communities depend on people stepping-up and filling roles, and although I am not sure of what that might be in the future, I know I will be involved in some way.