

SENIOR SAGE LEADERSHIP: INTERVIEW OF KEITH PORTER

Interview Conducted by Gary Quehl

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

My parents bought property in Nevada County in 1950 when I was 8 years old. My family and I moved back to the same property permanently in 2004 and rebuilt the family home. So we have been back here the last 6 years as a permanent resident. We live one mile from Cedar Ridge between Cedar Ridge and Peardale.

- 2. Are you working, semi-retired, or retired? May I ask how old you are?**

I am fully retired now and am 68.

- 3. If you would, please share a bit about your personal history: where you grew went to school and college; what organizations you have worked for and the positions you have held.**

I was born and raised in LA (Whittier) until age 8, lived in Nevada County for 4 years, and went to Downieville High School in Sierra County. I attended the University of the Pacific and graduated in 1963 with a degree in electrical engineering. Later on, while a full-time employee, I completed a graduate certificate program at USC in telecommunications management and some graduate work towards a masters degree, which I did not complete.

After college I started working for Pacific Telephone and its related successor companies (AT&T, Pacific Bell, Pacific Telesis) until I retired in 1990 with a favorable early retirement incentive plan. Then I did fulltime consulting for several years.

We went to England for three years with a subsidiary of Pacific Telesis and started a cable TV company in the UK. I began as an engineering consultant but later ran the company for a while. I returned to the US as a consultant for another Telesis company, which later became Air Touch. When we were awarded a license to build a cellular telecom company in Spain, I commuted to Madrid for a couple of years. When I was back in the US, with my wife and daughter we started WorkVantage, Inc. a workplace training and development company. Activities included career counseling, organizational development and succession

planning, and training in a variety of areas like conflict resolution and non-financial aspects of retirement planning. Most clients were employers, but occasionally individuals also paid for our services. Together, we authored and published a book in 1997, “Me, Myself and I, Inc.: Ten Steps to Career Independence.” We closed the company three years ago. I continue to occasionally work on projects with my daughter, but for all practical purposes I am retired at this point.

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

My father was a Methodist minister He became a minister when I was 12, and my mother fully participated in the decision. He was very interested in social issues and expressed it through his ministry and the church. Latter on, he became involved in Big Brothers/Big Sisters. My mother and father both set a pattern for community service which I have followed.

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 like people and think that is important. By nature I am a fairly patient person, but in my earlier days I wasn't forceful enough in some of the leadership roles that I had. I believe I have learned to balance things (i.e., have learned that I have to be both patient and impatient at the same time and apply those traits appropriately). Part of this balance, which I think I do reasonably well, is seeing the big picture while being able to focus on a particular practical action. So being able to bring this balance to many situations is probably my greatest strength. I also believe that a sense of humor is important in working with people, particularly in the volunteer community sector. This is different than the business world, where you have authority and people are paid to listen and follow directions. In the nonprofit world, a sense of humor is very important in helping to motivate volunteers.

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

- ***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 strongest is as a motivator, which is most consistently where I work. I think I am also a mobilizer, although in my current activities I express less of this because my focus right now is in the arts. I play the role of mediator with the organization I currently head, but not so much in the community as a whole. I would like to do more mentoring but don't have the time right now. I have done this in the past (not only for young people) and want to do more in the future—especially in helping people understand how organizations work and in finding ways to engage them in causes and projects.

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.

- **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 am involved heavily in two arts organizations: InConcert Sierra and the Arts Collaborative of Nevada County. I also volunteer with the Red Cross (a social services organization) in disaster preparedness and do some work with the Center for Nonprofit Leadership (education). I support environmental organizations but I'm not active in volunteering with them at this point. I also have participated with the suicide prevention task force (also social services). As a volunteer I am close to full time, about 150 hrs a month, the bulk of it with InConcert Sierra.

- 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?**

I am Board President of InConcert Sierra and was originally invited to be on the board. I am unpaid, and probably 120 of the 150 hours of my volunteer work are devoted to that organization.

- 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.

In my role as Board President, I do whatever needs attention. We have a very capable staff, but we are understaffed for the level of work that exists. So I do a bit of office work, with lots of set-up and take down for concerts. I am also the concert coordinator, which includes putting together the volunteers. And I am the organization's "cheerleader," where a sense of humor is important because people in a volunteer organization tend to do what they want rather than what may be needed. So I cajole, encourage, and beg a lot. And I jump in when someone else fails or doesn't want to do what is needed—all the time expressing appreciation for what volunteers are willing to do. As president I asked a committee to help develop a strategic plan, but in reality I have done most of it myself and presented the results at a board retreat.

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

I most helped when I came on to the board about two years ago thinking I would serve on the board for a while and eventually take on a leadership role. But when I arrived the board was in a crisis that split the board and a number of people left. People asked me to stand for the board presidency in a contested election, and I was elected. Guiding the organization through that was extremely critical, and I am proud that we got through the transition with no permanent scars or breakage even when there was some hostility, anger, conflict, and some board members leaving. In the end, those who left were good losses in the sense that they didn't share the organization's vision. I was also able to resolve the remaining dynamics of various board factions. We do not have any residual bad feelings; some people may not particularly like each other but no one is out to sabotage the organization or speak badly of it. So I think as the result of this transition and a lot of hard work by many, the organization has ascended to a higher level in the last several years.

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

The most challenging roadblock has been the transition within the board. Continuing challenges include the need for funding to pay our staff competitively and to continue growing our organization. However, I still have some board members who are very conservative about how we should budget next year for staff and artistic director compensation. There is some tension about this, but it is not impeding us greatly. Of course, it would be nice to have a large endowment, as our endowment is quite small.

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

Without question, getting through the earlier board crisis with minimal breakage has been very satisfying. Another is that our artistic programs are growing significantly in quality and audience appreciation. It is extremely satisfying to see our community's interest in chamber music grow. The flip side is to avoid becoming a victim of our own success. Having our first sell-out ever (audience of 475 for the Vienna Boys Choir concert) enables us to see what staffing will be required to manage the large concerts and attendance. Success always brings another set of challenges.

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

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

I am motivated by the fun of seeing things happen as the result of the efforts of others and myself. It gives me great personal satisfaction. And it feels good to put my shoulder to the wheel and help make this a better community. There is a lot of need. The carrot and the stick both apply. I hate to see needs in the community unmet. I would like to do more with kids in the future when I have more time.

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

Yes and no. My answer is "no" in the sense that I do what I do by choice, and "yes" when my involvement conflicts with things I need to do around my property or other business to attend to. I am probably over-committed right now in volunteer activities and feel a need at times to wind down a bit. But I remind myself that I chose to commit at this level of activity. So fundamentally I don't feel a sense of personal sacrifice, and I enjoy what I am going.

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

Personal benefits include a sense of satisfaction, doing something that helps others, teaming with good people, and sharing a vision for a better future that is possible and important to those that I am working with.

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?

I don't think I have changed dramatically. Earlier in my life I was more of an observer, and I reflected and contemplated about things. More often now I sometimes "shoot from the hip" but usually, I think, in an appropriate way. I'm more spontaneous and less analytical. I learned much throughout my business career. I am probably not a "natural executive" in terms of how I grew up and how I went through school. I learned in business what it took to succeed, and even if I did not agree with the culture at times I recognized the need and adjusted to it. Now I think it is great to come into a situation where I am not pressured to behave in a particular way but can draw from my own resources and what I think is right and what I find rewarding. So I think over time I have shed "hyper-analysis and contemplation" in favor of more spontaneity.

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?

The ability to have both patience and impatience and pick the appropriate combination of what is needed at a given time. The ability to see the big picture. A bias for action. Liking people, being able to understand people and their different characteristics and attributes, and relate to them in a way that is appropriate to them. To be adaptable to people who express themselves in different ways. And a sense of humor. These traits are what I have tried to bring into my own leadership and I think they've helped me to be successful.

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

Spiritual to me means a sense of connection to something larger and a sense of appreciation and awe of what we are given. I and we have been given something incredibly beautiful, useful and valuable. And we should do the best we can with what we have to appreciate this. I'm no longer involved with any organized religion.

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

I know I now have more fun being an unpaid leader, as opposed to when I was paid and had to match someone else's expectations. I am now part of a group which develops and tries to match our own expectations, and this has allowed me much more freedom. Also, being less analytical and more spontaneous now is something I like. I have also learned to intervene earlier with others when I see that they are not aligned with the agreed upon mission. I'm more willing and I don't wait as long in resolving conflict at an earlier stage, whereas earlier I was much more averse and cautious in dealing with conflict.

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

I see some leaders being ego-driven and thus power-driven. They express their own ego needs rather than the needs of their organization. In the commercial sector this usually translates into being money driven. I also see this in the nonprofit sector but to a significantly lesser degree because there is less opportunity for people's egos to get rewarded through financial benefits and additional power.

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

I try to stay up to date in the areas where I am working, currently primarily in the arts. And I attend any workshops on nonprofit management that are available locally.

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

Being able to be appropriate in the simplest possible terms. To be able to see the context you are in and apply yourself to that context in the most creative way. It's about the holding of dichotomies and being able to pick an appropriate position. Patience and impatience, big picture, bias toward action, tolerance of people versus being able and willing to correct, guide and suggest. In addition, I think a sense of humor is important. I see wisdom as the ability to pick appropriate response from dichotomies.

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

Being raised in my parent's home was certainly a formative experience. As a college student I was appointed president of a church youth group, which was my first significant leadership experience that mattered—as opposed to being president of my dorm in college, which didn't really matter. In the church youth group we had a counselor who was an outstanding leader, and from him I drew insights about being more direct, demanding, and appropriate and to let go at appropriate times so the youth could make their own mistakes. That really was my leadership model to this day. I learned much from that one year experience.

Another peak experience was the Creative Initiative Foundation (1960's) in the S.F. Bay area. It focused on very broad educational and spiritual issues as well as each individual's personal psychological and developmental issues. One aspect was essentially a psychological self-help group with a lot of confrontational investigation of personal motivations. It was very revealing and life changing for me in understanding my defenses and learning how the world actually works. It was really a self-revelatory, life changing experience. Some found the experience hard to take, and sometimes it was, but the growth opportunities were profound.

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 do see that and feel somewhat sorry for them because life is so much richer when you are involved. There are people who are now free of the requirements of having to earn a living and are not quite sure of what to do with themselves. This seems empty to me. Maybe their lack of involvement is due to the fact that they may not have yet had this kind of enjoyable, fun experience. Maybe they don't want to expose themselves to this kind of experience because they fear that if they enjoy it there will be demands on their time (commitment) and financial resources. In other words, they haven't experienced a place where they feel satisfaction enough to compensate for what they would have to put into it. I find people who are primarily focused on leisure activities to be boring, frankly.

Involvement in community service has to be “one by each.” Someone has to understand a person's situation well enough to invite them into something they would be willing to say yes to; this is the only way they will begin to experience a sense of satisfaction from involvement. I have seen this occur to some degree over the last couple of years in the work I am doing at InConcert Sierra. Some people

who were reluctant to join the board became drawn to it by the quality of the organization. The beauty of the music has also helped to attract people to the organization. Again, when a person gets a sense of personal satisfaction, they begin to offset the costs of time, energy and commitment. So inviting others into community involvement has to be on an individual basis, not en masse. And we need to do this so our leaders are replenished as the aging process moves some people to less activity. A form of succession planning needs to continue to take place.

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?

Yes, but I don't think we are alone or unique in this regard. Part of the fun is being able to say that this place is very special. Having lived around the country, around California and in Europe in a number of communities, I have seen many lifestyles. But I also continue to be reminded when I visit my grandchildren in the Bay Area that this area is special. Far less materialism and expediency go on here. We are a very mixed community, which is a strength (although not mixed in an ethnic minority sense), and we are a microcosm of people from all over the US and every walk of life; this includes problems with people with limited economic resources, and some behavioral problems like drug abuse.

This community changed significantly in the late 60's and 70's when the three golf course communities were developed (Lake of the Pines, Alta Sierra, and Lake Wildwood). These developments attracted lots of relatively affluent people of middle-age and older, at a stage in life where they were willing to try different things. This brought resources to the community and helped to establish a number of nonprofits, a larger number than most communities our size. For example, there is considerable support for our libraries, for organizations like The Friendship Club and Big Brothers/Big Sisters, for the excellent schools we have, and for Sierra Community College. There are also a decided number of people in this community who are willing to put their shoulder to the wheel to make it even better. And our physical surrounding and beauty also make this an attractive area in which to live. So yes, in our own way I think this community is unique and we are playing to certain strengths, including the arts community which most communities of our size do not have.

20. Do you have anything else you'd like to add as we close?

No.