

EMERGING SAGE LEADERSHIP: INTERVIEW OF GALEN ELLIS

Interview Conducted by Lori Burkhart

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 live in Nevada City and I've been here four years.

2. **May I ask how old you are?**

I am 48 years old.

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 primarily in San Diego. I was born in Northern California and lived for a short time in Illinois. I went to high school in San Diego and for one year in Urbana, Illinois. After High School, I went to a community college, then UC San Diego for a year, but wasn't ready to complete my degree. I worked for several years and finally went back to San Francisco State and finished my bachelors in 1989. Then I got my Master's Degree in Public Health from Berkeley in 1991.

I graduated from high school when I was 16 and then had retail and government jobs. I started working in the non-profit sector by the time I was 18. I worked for a feminist women's health center called Womancare in San Diego, and then did consulting for labor unions and some public health work while I was in graduate school. After I completed my MPH at Berkeley, I went to work for a non-profit called Center for Working Life. So, my early years were mostly in women's health and the labor movement. Later, I went into a more traditional public health organization and worked for Contra Costa County Health Services. When I had my kids, I did consulting again for about nine years and then came here to work for the Nevada County Public Health Department.

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

Not really, I'm the only one. Everyone else is either in the private sector or independent. In terms of my parents and upbringing, there was always a lot of support for my inclinations, which started very young. If I wanted to do something in the community, my mom would help organize and support it. We did puppet shows about ecology, where she would help me make the puppets and the stage, and I got all the neighborhood kids to come. I felt we had to tell people about the environment. The first community organization I developed was when I was ten. It was called TWIRP: The World is Really Polluted. We educated through puppet shows, made posters, and put them up around the neighborhood.

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?**

Passion is my greatest strength. I was always pretty introverted, so it was almost counter to my personality to be involved in any kind of leadership. But I couldn't help myself because I felt so strongly about things. And from a very young age, I've been an optimist and believed in change: that if we collectively put our minds to something, we could make it happen. I always felt that for myself, but when I saw what a group of people could do together, I became passionate about the process.

I love being behind the scenes, stimulating people to do things. I'm more of a facilitator than a charismatic leader. I see myself more as someone who connects with people through relationships. I can connect with groups pretty intimately, but don't see myself as the one getting up with the microphone.

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

- ***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?

My strongest roles are mentor and mobilize, followed by motivator.

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?

Social service, education, government and political, a little bit of arts, environmental, and other non-profit organizations. The majority of my time is with government—about half with the health department and half with other non-profits and environmental groups. I give about 120-140 hours a month to my civic involvements.

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?**

The health department is a paid job, which I applied for. I put in about 80 plus hours a month. I am also consulting with organizations here as well as Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area.

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

First, describe the leadership role that you play.

I have a management role that I play. I supervise a number of programs, and my style is a mentoring role. I support staff in their leadership and help to move the health department into new areas, like chronic disease prevention. I also create partnerships for the health department by providing community service in ways that further the mission of public health.

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

I have most helped my organization by representing the health department in community partnerships. Two in particular come to mind. One is to carry public health beyond the four walls of the health department with community-based collaborative efforts. The second is developing a chronic disease prevention program with non-traditional partners, like non-profits, environmental groups, and transportation and agriculture.

The vision for chronic disease prevention is to see some impact on obesity, in particular, because it addresses quality of life and the need for a healthier community. We want to make an impact on the most vulnerable populations in the community and seek funding when we can. For example, we have been able to get a walkability grant that focuses on low income residents. It was for \$375,000, and then we attracted another \$850,000 for infrastructure development. It was a “we” because of the program’s collaborative nature. I knew it was possible to attract that kind of funding, so I facilitated the process of bringing together people to create a common vision. Even after the funding ends, a culture remains in these organizations to help people recognize there are other resources in our community. For example, after I had moved here I found some phenomenal assets I had never seen in other communities in which I have lived and worked. Yes, I had my own value to add, but the values that support community health and wellness here enable Nevada County to achieve more in one year than urban communities I’ve worked in could achieve in three-five years.

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

They are all internal to the health department. The external frustrations of a few difficult personalities have been nothing compared to the internal challenges of working in a large bureaucracy. This never affected external program outcomes, but it has impacted me. I started to feel burned-out.

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

Being out in the community and seeing the collective creativity, and then the results of that creativity, has given me the most meaning and satisfaction. Another source of satisfaction is working with those leaders that recognize and appreciate diverse community assets and then tap into them.

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?

We all have to admit it's about personal satisfaction. There may have been a time in my life when I would have given a more lofty answer like, "I want world peace." But it really is about personal satisfaction and relationships. There is so much satisfaction in living in a community like this that values wellness, relationships and quality of life. I am highly motivated by what is happening here. We have great things being accomplished by extraordinary people, for example our dynamic young woman mayor.

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

No. If I have to, I set limits. My involvement in community, social, family, personal, and professional life has blurry lines. It is important to me that my kids see that this is what is important to me, and that it is integrated into my life in a balanced way.

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

Feeling part of a community, especially the feeling of being connected to something bigger 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?

Mostly it is one in the same. Pretty much everything I do connects back to community health and wellness. I help one of my kids to fundraise for animal rescue organizations, and my other is in Little League. I also support their schools. It's all connected.

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?

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'll always be involved in community wellness. I'm working a lot in the disability field right now. Although the content is new to me, the need to build organizational capacity is not. This involves helping organizations to identify the results they want, engaging them in strategic planning to get those results, and then measuring to see if results have been

achieved. I've always wondered if I'd move in another direction, but I don't see this changing.

- 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?**

Certainty is a good one to let go of. When I was younger, certainty was the source of my passion. That is, I believed that something was right or wrong. Today, when the feeling of certainty arises, I let it go because it creates a barrier to creativity and collaboration. Instead of certainty, I've cultivated a stronger attitude of curiosity, which is a much more expansive state of consciousness.

- 14. 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 quality I most admire in effective leaders is their belief we can do anything. These are people who recognize community assets and know how to tap them. An effective leader has vision and deep, deep respect and humility. They recognize the strengths of diverse styles and cultures and ways of being in the world and are able to build alliances across those differences.

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

I have been involved with different practices and groups, but at this moment there is not really a specific tradition for me. It is more of a resonant feeling in my heart. It is the feeling that comes when my edges dissolve and I don't feel separated from anything. It comes and goes, because it is important for us to feel our edges and feel our separateness, while remembering they are not real. My heart is able to emerge when I allow those edges to dissolve... but then my heart would fall out of my body if I didn't have a form! So my spirituality has to do with this balance, and my ability to recognize it.

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

As I have matured, my leadership is less about trying to be or do something and more about resting in what I know are my strengths and trusting myself. This is huge for me. I was effective in my earlier years because of my energy level and my commitment and vision, but it was also very stressful. I felt I was trying to be something and prove something, but as I have progressed in my career I am much

more restful and able to offer my gifts without needing to prove something. It is way more satisfying.

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

Not trusting. I'm referring to when we don't trust ourselves and the gifts and strengths that we bring and also to when we don't trust the process and collective wisdom and try to make something happen when it just isn't ready. An effective leader will press against the edges and limitations and allow a group to see them, yet let the group come to its own conclusion of what is possible. All too frequently leaders push and press past those edges, and as a result they don't bring people along with them. This has to do with failing to recognize the strengths and assets that everyone has, and avoiding tapping into those that the leader may be uncomfortable with. It can be a painful process for a leader to break out of that.

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

It is about letting go. Just letting go. Seeing the limitation in something, touching it again and asking, "Is it real, can I let this one go?" And then relaxing. Relaxation is very important, and some of relaxation is simply about trust.

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

Early in my career I was involved in pulling together key community leaders to work on improving the quality of life in a low-income neighborhood. We held a community meeting, and I had my flip charts and markers and questions up on the wall. We were so proud of ourselves, asking for all of this input before designing the program. During the meeting one key African-American woman, who was a leader from the neighborhood, became teary-eyed and walked out of the meeting. When I followed up with her I found she was really angry. She felt manipulated by that process. Once again professional people had come in with their flipcharts and markers asking for something from them rather than to take the time to sit down to find out who she and her neighbors were. That was devastating for me in my early thirties. I thought I had screwed-up and that we'd never be able to launch this program. Shortly after the meeting, I went to the woman's home, and she made me tea and brought out food. She said, "Listen, we all have gifts, I have gifts, you have gifts, the single moms have gifts, and the drug dealers down the street have gifts. Let's just come together and understand what gifts we have that can make our community better." It was a very painful lesson, for it had to do with the old adage that if you come with your cup full you can't receive anything. Clearly, I needed my cup emptied. I was just out of

graduate school and my cup was full. I was proud, I had answers, and I wasn't letting anything new in. That experience brought me to my knees and emptied my cup. So what I learned from this peak experience is to keep my cup empty.

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

Everything happens for a reason. It has all served me.

21. 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 born of years of experience and the cultivation of compassion. It has to do with bringing to bear what we have learned from experience, but it also honors the development of everyone involved. Once again, it has to do with offering our gifts with humility rather than arrogance.

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?

A lot of people haven't thought much about how their talents and skills relate to public life. There is a false sense that community service is sacrifice, duty, or obligation. I guess we need to understand this attitude and learn how to turn it around.

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. Everyone I have met loves being here. I've never been anywhere like this. What could be more attractive than everyone loving to live here? There are so many organizations that give back, and there is a way in which all the sectors are connected. There is a web here that makes you feel safe and want to give back.

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

No.

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