

THE VARIETIES OF CIVIC INVOLVEMENT: SENIOR SAGE LEADERS

My civic involvements feed my spirit. Senior Sage Leader

Themes

Unlike their emerging sage counterparts, most senior sage leaders are either fully or partly retired, so their favored civic organizations are largely outside the workplace. They tend to be in nonprofit organizations, fraternal and service clubs, and business and religious organizations.

By far the leading civic involvements for senior sages are nonprofit organizations, where they have 38 affiliations. Some senior sage leaders provide as much as 100 or more hours of service each month, with the average being 20-30 hours in such capacities as board officer, committee chair, and volunteer. Two paid senior sage leaders (music director, founder) each provide 200 hours of service per month.

Favored civic organizations for senior sage leaders are led by Music in the Mountains, (11 involvements), the Center for Nonprofit Leadership (four involvements), InConcert Sierra (four involvements), The Friendship Club (three involvements), and Habitat for Humanity (three involvements). Other senior affiliations include The Center for the Arts, Community Recovery Resources, Elder Care Providers Coalition, Empire Mine Park Association, The Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital, the Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital Foundation, Hospitality House, Nevada County Television, Mission Focused Solutions, North Star House, Sierra Family Medical Clinic, and Youth Can Do Program.

The senior sages' second most favored civic involvements are fraternal and service clubs, faith-based organizations, and business associations. These include such organizations as the Grass Valley Downtown Association, Interfaith Food Ministry, the Nevada County Business

Association, Rotary, and Twin Cities Church. The one paid position among these averages 240 hours of service a month, and the unpaid positions contribute between 20 and 60 hours.

Reflections

Civic engagement in organizations that serve youth are particularly compelling and gratifying for many senior sage leaders. Often they do this for their own children who are now parents, and that bridge across three generations is critical for the community's vitality because it keeps Grass Valley and Nevada City from "becoming an old folks community" — or what Robert Bellah and his colleagues calls "lifestyle enclaves" that can derail our American democratic experience. (Endnote 87)

The Meta-Level Organization

Most communities have service organizations like Rotary and distinctive nonprofit organizations like Music in the Mountains and the United Way. Grass Valley and Nevada City are blessed to have a third type of organization: The Center for Nonprofit Leadership (CNL). CNL sponsors nonprofit leadership seminars and offers best practice workshops and forums that help to strengthen and advance the 50 nonprofit member organizations that take advantage of its services. This third, meta-level type of organization is rarely found in most communities, and we believe it is critical to the fostering and promoting of senior-level sage engagement in Twin Towns.

Community Leadership: Diversity and Nimbleness of the Heart

Most senior sages are able to identify a litany of nonprofit organizations in which they are actively engaged; on average, each is involved in at least three, ranging from political action groups to arts organizations and from work with youth to work with the elderly. Senior sages are also involved in multiple sectors of community life. Lessons learned in one (e.g., the arts) are applied to a second (e.g., the environment) and to a third (e.g., politics), and the networks established with one are engaged on behalf of the others.

In many instances the unifying factor is the interest that senior sage leaders have in the complex workings of Grass Valley and Nevada City. As they begin to understand the various community

sectors, they come to fully appreciate the interwoven relationships that exist; and when this happens they see the need to become involved in more than one sector. The hearts of senior sages are diverse, and these sages are nimble in their movement across boundaries as they acquire knowledge and experience in many areas. They are even more agile in their capacity to simultaneously keep many balls in the air and—perhaps most telling—deft in their capacity and willingness to engage various leadership styles and strategies in different organizations.

This passion of senior sages to extend beyond one sector and engage in a widely diverse set of initiatives is very impressive, especially given that these men and women are often retired and supposedly past their most productive and energetic years! The one lingering issue with senior sages' passions and diversity of involvements is that many of the same people often can be found in some of these different organizations, making it sometimes difficult for “new folks” to break in.

An Arts Destination of Distinction

Grass Valley and Nevada City are particularly noted for the richness and diversity of the arts. Given the extraordinary number and range of theatrical and musical events, museums, galleries, and arts fairs, the community is fast becoming an “arts destination of distinction.” Some of these offerings are well-known and widely publicized – such as Music in the Mountains, the Center for the Arts, InConcert Sierra, and KVMR’s Celtic Festival. Others are less widely known, yet still are of exceptional quality. These arts offerings are effectively coordinated through Nevada County Arts, and it is fascinating to see how much the community gets done when compared with other rural areas in California.

And there may be a secret to this success. The flourishing of the arts in Twin Towns may be tied to the unique dynamics that are often found in “island” communities; that is, in communities which are at least partially isolated from major urban arts competition. On an island, you learn to do art yourself rather than traveling many miles to attend a theater or gallery that is run and operated by professionals who are “in the arts business” full-time. One senior sage notes that Nevada County is a very powerful “starter” county. As in a 1930s Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland movie, a small group of people can just “start-up” in a local barn or an abandoned office

building, small manufacturing plant, or vacant Main Street store. This starter mentality and dynamics may have something to do with community size. During the final project seminar of emerging and senior sage leader interviewers, it was widely acknowledged that Nevada County is “not so large that you can’t get things done, and not so small that you can’t get things done.” “Small is big,” and even a slight bit of isolation seems to generate a significant level of arts activity. This is undoubtedly true of other areas of community life in Twin Towns as well.

Sustainability of an Island

Many senior sage leaders are engaged in some form of governance, such as the Chambers of Commerce or nonprofit boards. In most instances, their involvements seem to be driven by a commitment to environmental, fiscal, or cultural sustainability. Senior sage leaders are not so much interested in controlling their community as they are in expanding effective discourse. For example, how to get more disadvantaged people involved in community governance, how to nourish cultural life, how to create conditions for new businesses to flourish and strengthen the economy of Twin Towns. While the term “island” doesn’t get used or discussed very often, the senior sage leaders of Grass Valley and Nevada City recognize that they live in “an island” community. And as with all such communities, the islanders have to do most everything themselves without much help coming from the outside.

Social Welfare

Nevada County has a large number of nonprofit social welfare agencies—ranging from Habitat for Humanity to KARE Crisis Nursery, from agencies that address the needs of babies to food co-ops, from service to people with drug habits to those who are homeless and those who have been abused. These agencies depend on the volunteer work done by senior sage leaders and others in the community who “give from their heart,” expecting and receiving no financial compensation.

Some of this “heart” results from the unique relationship that exists between the county volunteer organizations and the government agencies that serve these communities—particularly the Nevada County Health and Human Service Agency. The director has a unique philosophy about the role his agency should play in the community: he believes that nonprofit organizations should

provide as many community services as they possibly can, and that county government's job is to make this happen as often as is practicable. This has not always been the way of Nevada County government; as is the case with so many county, state, and federal agencies, there was a long-held and pervasive view that government agencies should assume sole or at least primary responsibility for human services.

Of course, there is more to the story than just collaborative relationships between the community's government and nonprofit sectors. In many ways, as noted previously, the culture of Twin Towns contributes to what Alexis de Tocqueville (and later Robert Bellah and his colleagues) called "habits of the heart." This is particularly the case among its senior sage leaders. As Hillary Clinton wrote about children needing to be raised by a village, perhaps seniors are most able to find a calling when they live in communities like Twin Towns that have both heart and place value on the lives of everyone there. (Endnote 88)

Many senior sage leaders came to Nevada County from other communities in California or other regions of the United States. To a person they note how remarkable it is that Grass Valley and Nevada City are able to respond rapidly to individuals and families who are in crisis—and how flexible and often entrepreneurial nonprofit organizations can be in making this happen. For instance, when senior volunteers at Habit for Humanity temporarily run out of home building projects, they often contact nonprofit organizations to see if they can help. The commitment, responsiveness, and organizational ability among these senior leaders are particularly poignant, given that many of them don't have the deep roots of continuity often found there.

References

Robert Bellah and Others (1985) *Habits of the Heart*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hillary Clinton (2006) *It Takes A Village* (10th Anniversary Ed.) New York: Simon and Schuster.