

EMERGING LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITY: INTERVIEW WITH KATY ECKERT

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

I have been a resident of Nevada County for 35 years and currently reside in Grass Valley off HWY 174.

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

I am 40 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 was born in Long Beach, CA and then my family moved to Nevada County when I was six years old. My Dad had purchased 40 acres on the Yuba River and had built a cabin for camping. He became disabled and due to health and financial reasons, decided to sell our house in Long Beach and move to our cabin here in Nevada County. My Dad was a product of growing up during the Great Depression, and he had a very strong desire to be self-sufficient. I refer to it as “Robinson Crusoe” syndrome. So... I grew up on the river, learning to garden and care for farm animals. Our cabin was somewhat isolated and due to this and my Dad’s dislike of the public school system, my siblings and I were home schooled. Rarely did we children go to “town.” Instead, my Dad and Mom would leave us with my Uncle (who also lived with us), and they would go shopping and deal with any other matters. Our big family excursion was going to Church every Sunday to the St. Johns parish in North San Juan.

Our cabin did not have electricity or phone. We installed a pipeline from a natural spring to create running water. And, you could not actually drive the whole way to the cabin... instead you had about a .25 mile hike from where we parked, down into the canyon to get to our home. I learned to cook on a wood stove that was also our source of heat. I remember my Dad building the cabin and “helping” with tasks that a child could handle. Our lives revolved around simple things...chores, school work, the ebb and flow of the river, reading, playing card games, sailing bark “boats” around puddles, climbing rocks, hiking and panning for gold with my Dad.

We established a strong connection with the other members of the St. John’s church, especially one family who is now into its 5th generation of living in Nevada County. We would visit this family at their family ranch after Church on Sundays and our families grew even closer. My Dad especially enjoyed visiting with the elderly “uncles” and listening to their stories about the history of Nevada County. When I was about 12, the uncles passed away, leaving the only full time resident of the family alone for the first time in her whole life. She was in her 60’s by then, and she asked my Dad if he would consider allowing my older sister and me to live with her part-time and also attend the public high school. Mom & Dad agreed, and I moved to the ranch. That family became, and still is, a surrogate family to me.

I attended Nevada Union High School. Scholastically, it was not difficult for me. Socially, it was the first time I had ever spent around people my own age, and I found it overwhelming. I had very little in common with any of my classmates. I saw my family for only a few hours each week apart from holidays. We were only about 6 miles apart, but with no phones and limited transportation it was difficult. My last three siblings were born after I moved out. In a way it is a little like we were two separate generations within my family. I am the second oldest of ten.

After high school, I went away to CSU Chico to pursue a BS in Business Administration with options in Finance and Human Resource Management. I started off living there, but in my second year my youngest sister was diagnosed with leukemia, my Dad had triple heart bypass surgery, and my Mom was completely overwhelmed. I moved back to the Ranch and commuted a couple of days a week to school, worked a couple of days a week, and took my Mom and my baby sister to all of her medical appointments. A year and a half before I graduated, my family sold our cabin and property to the State Park and moved to West Virginia. My sister, while still under medical care, was in remission. I chose to stay here in Nevada County, renting a small apartment, working all types of miscellaneous jobs to support myself and commuting part time until I completed my degree.

I was a little burned out on commuting once I had my degree. I decided that I would work somewhere local. Nevada County was hiring, so I started work for the Department of Social Services handling internal human resources tasks. After two years, I changed positions to be an Employment and Training Worker helping clients become self-sufficient and gain employment. Two years after that, I decided that my best skill-set was more administrative, and so I took the Analyst position responsible for grant writing for the Department and the Health & Human Services Agency. Coincidentally, I was in this position for two years when I was approached by the CEO's office for Nevada County and went to work for them as an Analyst for the next 4 years. During this period I decided I wanted my Master's Degree, and I started the UC Davis Graduate School of Management Working Professionals Program and took classes 2-4 nights a week in Davis and Sacramento. I received my MBA with a focus in Finance in 2006. I also changed jobs with Nevada County, becoming the Chief Fiscal Administrative Officer for the Health & Human Services Agency. This is my current position.

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

When I think back to my days on the river, again I think of my Mom & Dad and their values. We did not have much in the way of material possessions and we definitely had a very modest lifestyle, but we always had sufficient food to eat and to share with others less fortunate than we were. The river was a place where many homeless or transient people gathered, as well as a place where many people came just to get away for a while. My parent's felt strongly that if someone needed a meal, they were always welcome to join us for dinner and share what we had. In all my years on the river, I honestly cannot remember more than a handful of times where we did not have one or more guests dining with us, including holidays.

My surrogate family also had a strong tradition of hospitality. Besides being deeply involved with their church, their ranch has a history of being a way-station for travelers heading further up into the mountains. People would stop and visit, and many time be invited to stay the night or share a meal.

For the community surrounding the ranch, potable water has long been an issue. The family's own and maintain their own water system. They have over a mile of pipeline coming from an abandoned flooded mine that they own. They have for over 60 years maintained accessibility to a high flow water line at their front gate, for anyone who needs it or wants it. During the summer, you will still see a line of trucks with water storage containers at the gate, waiting for their turn to get water. The family has also a strong history of involvement with the Nevada City Fire Department. From serving as volunteer fire chief, to responding as a volunteer to medical response and fire calls, to fundraising to purchase needed equipment, the family has served a myriad of needs. I myself spent several years as President of the Nevada City Fire Auxiliary.

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 think that my key strength is my determination and belief that if I set my mind to something, I can achieve it. I also believe that people can find a common goal and are willing to take steps towards meeting it. Sometimes one of my roles is to help identify opportunities or problems and break them down so that the next steps are recognizable. I also feel very strongly about respecting the strengths and opinions of others. Even if I have a different opinion, it doesn't invalidate another person's.

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?

I am rarely a public face. My role usually is working with individuals and small groups to influence change in Health & Human Services Programs. Sometimes, this is working with direct program staff; sometimes with State workgroups; sometimes with community members.

I am most involved in the monitor role. My position really focuses on ensuring that we spend public funds wisely and maintain financial sustainability in our programs. However, I work with others as a mobilizer and as a motivator on key areas that impact Health & Human Services and its programs.

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?

Through work I spend 180 to 240 hours per month in governmental organizations. While not currently allocating much time to these, I do have association with educational organizations (UC Davis alumni), and the Nevada City Fire Dept Auxiliary. I also sometimes provide guidance to staff in local non-profits such as Hospitality House.

- 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?**

Nevada County Health & Human Services Agency. I was recruited by the Director and am paid for my work. I spend 180 to 240 hours per month.

- 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.

I am the person in the County who understands the overall big picture of Health & Human Services finances. I also have a strong understanding of the rest of Nevada County finances. I have an insider knowledge-base about the politics affecting change in Nevada County.

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

My key leadership role is to work with other staff to identify potential financial problems or opportunities and come up with recommendations on actions to take to address them. While I am not directly involved with programs, I am directly involved with the financing of the programs.

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

One of the roadblocks that frequently arises is the concern that "finance is driving program decisions." There is truth to this, especially in times of economic hardship. This is extremely challenging, as I also feel the frustration of being forced to reduce valuable services to our clients.

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

What is most meaningful and satisfying is that these efforts have led to the ability to sustain the most core Health & Human Services programs. When one branch is operating in the red due to vagaries of funding, another branch helps out until solutions are found. There is a pendulum of funding in hard times. By pulling together and thinking creatively, we are able to sustain more than we ever would be able to achieve in silos.

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?

Through work, I get to focus on the greater good. I feel I am able to make a tangible difference. This is critically important to me. Work is my main civic activity.

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

I choose to put in extra hours in order to support the financial health of the Agency. And, yes, I am sacrificing my personal time. I am sacrificing other career opportunities.

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

I do feel that I make a meaningful difference. It is why I am still here.

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?

NA

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?

NA

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? If so, what are these and how have you changed?

Nothing comes to mind immediately...

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 willingness to listen, consider opinions and alternatives, allow free-speaking dialogue in appropriate venues, and demonstrate respect for all are qualities that I most admire in leaders. I believe that I have established a foundation of respect with everyone I work with, whether they be subordinates, peers, directors, or policy makers.

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

I have a strong personal faith but rarely observe traditional spiritual practices. For me, spending time with my family and extended family of friends is an affirmation of my deepest values. Spending time together and sharing life's small joys and challenges, helping one another and being present in each other's lives, enables us all to be stronger.

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

My leadership style has changed from working to influence change with a designated policy maker to also working to influence change within a program or system. I am working to involve all the stakeholders, not just the leaders.

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

A key mistake that I see leaders making is to try to oversimplify and treat a related group of issues exactly the same, without evaluating the individual circumstances of each.

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

Furtherance of my development and growth as a leader involve my continued education. I periodically take classes or go to seminars that I feel are worthwhile. I also seek out opportunities to network with leaders in other counties, discussing ideas, issues and strategies. Internally to the county I am working to pull task forces together on specific topics to develop consensus from all stakeholders around change; not just consensus from the leaders.

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

One is my decision to live and work in Nevada County, which started me working for local government. Also, when I took the job working in the CEO's office my eyes were opened to the big picture, and I could start seeing how little changes could make significant differences.

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

I truly feel that the person I am today would not exist if I changed the choices I made in my life. There are definitely milestones and ups and downs, but I like who I am, so I cannot say that I would make different choices.

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 means listening, acknowledging what you do not know, seeking as much information as you possibly can, and then deciding to act or not act.

- 22. 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?**

Many people I know work long hours and have young families. Time is a very limited commodity for them. Their involvement could be increased by coming up with projects that are family friendly and flexible in scheduling.

- 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?**

I love the natural beauty that surrounds us. I love the small town nature that enables the creation of relationships and sense of connectedness with everyone else. I love the accessibility of everything to the area – we are close to the mountains, close to the ocean, close to the big “city” and yet live in a rural area.

- 24. Is there anything else you’d like to say as we close?**

No