

## **Senior Leadership in Community: Interview with Dennis Fournier**

*[Note: This interview is one of 100 conducted in Nevada County, California by Gary Quehl and his colleagues. One half of the interviews were conducted with "senior sage leaders" (Dennis Fournier being one of these senior sage leaders). The other 50 interviews were conducted with "emerging sage leaders" in Nevada County. All of those who were interviewed are actively involved in the ongoing development of their community.]*

**You have been identified by friends and colleagues as one of our community's 50 top senior 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. We thank you for participating in our interview process.**

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

We moved to Penn Valley in May of 1987 and have lived in the same location ever since. I've come to like Penn Valley quite a bit actually.

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

I am retired and I will be 67 on my next birthday.

- 3. If you would, please share 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. And be as detailed as you would like.**

I grew up in a small Massachusetts town in New England. I joined the Air Force right out of high school at a very young 17 and was 21 four years later when I left. While in military service, I did a tour in France and Vietnam.

I married shortly after I left the service and went on to graduate from the University of Washington in Seattle. Then I did graduate work at Pacific Lutheran University in Lakewood, just outside of Tacoma. I had held a multitude of jobs when I was going through school and ended-up in 1974 getting a two-year internship with the Federal Highway Administration in administration and finance. One of attractions of the positions was I was able to spend my first year in Olympia on the condition that I would go to any state in the union where they needed me. I guess I was ready to go anywhere to get out of the rain.

They ended-up sending me to San Francisco in 1975, and I've been a Californian ever since. I stayed with the government until 1980 and then went out on my own. I contemplated developing a consulting firm because I had a half dozen

colleagues around the country who were experts in mass transportation. This was due to my having moved from highway transportation to mass transit, and that was becoming popular throughout the country. The Sacramento light-rail line had gone in, and I had a lot to do with that. But I quickly realized that I really didn't have an interest in starting a consulting firm, because this promised to involve 12 hour days, 7 days a week. I decided I just wasn't into that because my true passion was breeding horses. So I just started doing my own contract work and did that until 1989, when I realized I didn't want to do that kind of work the rest of my life either. It was a period where my partner and I started making very avant-garde furniture, and we sold it in San Francisco and Los Angeles design centers. That was a lot of fun, but it just didn't make any money.

Previously, in Washington State, I had volunteered for the Literacy Council to teach people who were illiterate how to read. It was in the late 1980s, I also had volunteered at the Interfaith Food Ministry. Then, in 1990, I saw an executive director position advertised in the local newspaper here for Hospice of the Foothills. I was at a point in my life that I wanted to be in an organization which did good work. I wasn't entirely certain what a hospice was, but I knew it was doing good work. I did my research, went and interviewed, and got the job. For the next 18 years, from 1990 to 2008, I was with Hospice of the Foothills. I had always wanted to give back to my community, but it wasn't until I went to Hospice that I realized its benefit how valuable it is for a community to have people participating on a voluntary basis. Two years ago I retired from Hospice, and here I am.

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

There wasn't a history of community service in my family background. Sometimes I wonder where I came from, because as a child there was no sense of that. We didn't have a lot of money, and my father worked all the time so didn't have time to volunteer. And my mother didn't have the time either. We were just a hardworking family with six kids. The idea of community service just wasn't there – we were probably looking more like the recipients of community service than anything.

I believe it was when I graduated from college and was looking for work that I developed some sense of wanting to be involved in my community. I found out about the Literacy Council, which taught people how to read, and decided that would be a nice thing to do. I wasn't particularly motivated by the idea of wanting to give back as I was by the thought it would make me feel good. And I have learned the great benefits that come from community involvement since that time.

5. **What do you consider to be the major strengths and capabilities that have made you an effective community leader? Are they rooted in action, in your personal style, in your organizational, political, and personal relationships, or in something else?**

I've thought a lot about this, and I just do my thing rather than considering myself as a leader. Any personal attributes I have had have not involved a personal agenda, so honesty has always been one of my strengths. I tend to look at what the end results should be, and then proceed to do the right thing without being circuitous. I've never felt I was particularly talented, but I always knew that if I did the right thing I couldn't go too far afield.

I attribute the success that I had with Hospice to my firm belief in its mission. Whenever I had difficult decisions to make, I always went back to the organization's mission. I think I've also been blessed with a God-given talent to get on well with people—and which partly explains my success in raising money for Hospice. So, having a personality that likes people and can overlook a lot in them has served me well. I also consider myself to be an excellent listener, and that has also helped me a great deal. These skills and strengths are rooted in my action and style. As a kid I naturally wanted to be liked by others. But over the years I learned that you have to like yourself in order to be liked by others. I have tried to live my entire life by this understanding.

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

- ***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 involvement in our community, which of these roles have you played and which do you consider to be your strongest?**

My strongest roles have been mentor and mediator, followed by motivator. Monitor and mobilizer are not who I am. When I look back at my years with Hospice, and how I blossomed along the way, I realize the only way you really help people along is to mentor them. I take mentoring seriously and believe it is an exceptional and valuable thing to do with an individual. It's easier to mentor people in your organization when you're in a higher position because they look up to you. So, mentoring has to do with whether you choose to become one and how you handle it.

Regarding my role as a mediator, I actually took a course and considered it as a career before coming to Hospice. If I remember correctly, it was back in the 80s when a group was trying to form a mediation team. When I read about mediation that was it, I was hooked. Mediation is such a good thing. If you have an issue and can't get two sides to sit down and talk to each other, you might as well go straight to arbitration, or skip arbitration and go straight to the courts. I think mediation works, so I have used it in my career and continue to use it today. It's the way people should be talking to each other.

I think I've been able to motivate those who I've wanted to motivate. To me, you motivate by example. You can't simply tell someone they have to be motivated. You've got to set an example to motivate others, and they've got to want to follow it. People tell me that I've had reasonable success in this. It's not something that I've necessarily set out to do as much as just realizing I was doing.

**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 was a political science major in college and a public administration major in graduate school. As a Kennedy-era kid from Massachusetts I had a natural interest in government when I was young, but my interest in government has waned as I've gotten older. In my younger years, I was an intern for the State of Washington and had experiences with government and political organizations. I loved it and even considered making government a career, but government became more socialistic along the way and I lost interest. Before my retirement, I worked hard to pass a bill in Sacramento for our new Hospice facility.

I volunteer now with the Interfaith Food Ministry. Before I started working for Hospice, I volunteered here in the 80s with the Interfaith Food Ministry and continue to do so. I liked it because it is a rubber-hits-the-road organization where you give food to people who need it. I've greatly admired that organization over the years because it has never hired a staff member and continues to function entirely with volunteers. That's a real attraction to me, and the organization now operates out of the old Pick-n-Pack Market on Whiting Street in Grass Valley. So once I retired and shed my life at Hospice, I went right to Interfaith and volunteer for them every Wednesday morning. I work like crazy and I'm exhausted when I go home, but it's so worthwhile that I continue to enjoy it. After I got there they asked whether I would like to become a board member. I told them I wasn't interested, that I just wanted to give food away. I work about 20-25 hours a month with them.

The Center for Nonprofit Leadership (CNL) is the organization that I've worked with forever and ever. I think I might even have been one of its founders. I spend a lot of time with CNL because of its mission, which I equate with Hospice in terms of its importance to our community. We're out there trying to help our nonprofit organizations be as good as they can be. The difficulty of CNL's mission is frustrating sometimes, but it's worth it. When I was working at Hospice, I put in less time than I do now. Now I'm Vice President of the CNL Board and chair the fund development committee. I probably put in 20-25 hours a month. CNL is a good balance to the Interfaith Food Ministry, in that it takes more brain power.

So when you put it all together, my volunteering involves 40-50 hours a month. This gives me a very balanced life. I've seen too many people retire and have no life, but that's not me. My life is very rich and full. Of course, it's important for people to remember how to say "no." I was much better at that when I was younger, so I'm trying to re-educate myself on how to say "no" again. I am absolutely loving the way my retirement life is unfolding, and I don't want anything to get in the way of that.

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 would probably say the Interfaith Food Ministry here. CNL is so strong that it could get along just fine without me, but that's not the case with Interfaith. Some of us are regulars who show up week after week after week, and others show up when they can. The regulars know the entire operation, and we've become valuable. If I were to stop, I'd be sorely missed. I think I'd be missed at CNL,

but what I do at Interfaith would be missed even more. I approached Interfaith to volunteer. It's not a paid role, strictly volunteer, and I put in about 20-25 hours a 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.**

It's not a leadership role. There are a lot of older ladies there, and I joke around with them a lot. I enjoy this aspect of Interfaith and have no desire to assume a leadership role.

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

I do a lot of the heavy work that many older folks can't do. The process involves spending two hours getting food in the cooler organized. The volunteers are primarily ladies, and they are very good at sorting food. Before we open our doors, the boxes of food have been brought out from the cooler and put on the line. It's heavy work, and that's why I get so tired doing it. Because I'm a regular and know just what to do, my role would be tough to fill because of its physical demands.

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

There are things about the organization that are comical rather than challenging. For example, so many bosses and people shouting, "Can you do this? Can you do that?" We're running all over the place, and it's challenging but enjoyable and I laugh about it. Because it's so low-key, I have no responsibility other than getting food out, and that's good energy. You take out a bag of food and see people there, some of them with kids. Then you go and get them a treat or more food. If folks are new, we'll give them extra food to tide them over until they become regulars. There's some paperwork involved that is pretty minute, but the volunteers out front take care of that and develop a ticket for the order that we fulfill.

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

Globally, their mission is very satisfying—seeing people get fed. That's the bottom line of why we are all there. There is also the wonderful spirit of joking and getting on well. No one gets angry, and we all have a good time because we're there for the same reason.

**10. I want to ask you three additional questions about your civic involvements in our community:**

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

I decided very early on to do volunteer work, but I'm not sure where that came from in my life because I wasn't brought up with that in my family's experience. I guess it's that I've had a very good life and feel a strong responsibility of wanting to give back—something I believe we all should do if we can. Also, from a selfish point of view, I get fulfillment from it. Those are two pretty good motivators. My initial challenge was to find just the right organization, and I feel I've done that. With CNL and it's the wonderful mission, and I get to use my brain. With Interfaith, I feel my feet on the earth. Both are very satisfying.

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

Yes, to a degree this is true. Anyone who gives freely of their time for volunteer work feels there is some sacrifice, but they wouldn't do it if they didn't think it was worth it. Sure, instead of volunteering 40-50 hours/month, I could be doing other things like lying on a lounge or reading a book. But that's not the point.

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

It's all about fulfilling a sense of personal responsibility. If I didn't volunteer I would feel guilty about it. There are also wonderful social benefits that enrich my life, including the friends I have at both CNL and Interfaith Food Ministry. There is also an important distinction between working for pay and volunteering yourself. When you're involved in a paid job, you always have to contend with the things you really don't want to do that are stressful. With volunteering, it's different. You do something that's productive, help the community, meet new people and enjoy them, and not have whole lot of stress attached to it.

**11. One of the benefits of growing older is that we are increasingly able to reflect on our experiences and to 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?**

Early on when I was younger, I questioned everything. I was full of myself and thought I should be the leader. Once I got into a professional role in my career path I actually began to feel and act like a leader, but I had a tendency to micromanage because I thought I knew what was best. When I started to pull

away from doing that, my real leadership qualities developed. I realized that the test for a true leader is to recognize the value of other people and the benefits they bring, so get out of the way and let them thrive. That's how I developed as an effective leader. I came to love watching the process of people developing. It's so fulfilling to witness this happening, to get out of the way and watch others grow.

**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?**

Strength and tact. I remember one board member in particular who we had at Hospice. He was a gruff guy, very successful, very wealthy, and from his career he was accustomed to being in charge. When we were in meetings a question would come up during discussion and this guy would cut-off people with his own answer—which always turned-out to be right. However, he would also without fail acknowledge and apologize when he felt he had been inappropriate. I had so much admiration for that guy. Later, when he died, his wife called and asked if I would say a few words at his funeral. I said that he used to call himself an atheist and didn't believe in God or in spirituality. But to me, he was one of the more spiritual people I had ever met. To me, spirituality is how you live your life, how you relate to one another. The fact that this man was able to apologize when he was wrong made people love him for this trait. So, I think tact and diplomacy in leadership is really crucial.

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

I believe in a higher authority, that one can get guidance from that authority, and that one should keep that relationship to oneself. I've drawn a lot of strength over the years from this point-of-view. In my view of spirituality, I put a great deal of emphasis on not being judgmental of others. I tend to think of spirituality as how we live our lives on a daily basis and how we interact with one another. It all boils down to the old Golden Rule, which is not simple or easy and doesn't always work in the short-term. In looking back at my leadership role, I've gained strength from my spirituality. When difficult times arose, I've had a spiritual base to draw on.

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

I have learned not to micromanage and to depend on the abilities of others. And more than just depend on their abilities, I enjoy them.



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

Based on my own experience, I think that micromanaging out of fear is a problem with some people. They don't let people thrive and succeed. I think that's a problem, particularly with emerging leaders. I see great parallels with the developmental stages of nonprofit organizations. Micromanaging people is the same thing, and it's fear-based. If leaders are lucky, they will come to a point where their own growth prohibits them from micromanaging others. It's very interesting to learn this along the way.

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

I'm probably not growing and developing as much as I could be. By being involved in my volunteer work, I try to keep my brain active. But I have no interest in keeping on the cutting edge of emerging leadership practices. The only way I do that is through CNL. I also try to keep myself healthy and my mind youthful and active. That's really all that I do.

**17. The two characteristics most often associated with sage leader wisdom are *unusual experience* and *the exercise of sound judgment*. What does having wisdom mean to you?**

I think anyone with their eyes and ears open is going to acquire wisdom over time. What wisdom means to me is that people sometimes look to me for advice on issues. The fulfilling thing is that I've come far enough in my life to realize I actually have enough experience and value to possess and share wisdom with others. I wasn't very self-confident as a youngster, so it's been a rewarding journey to arrive at the point that I can legitimately feel this way without feeling conceited about it. The word that best describes wisdom is "appreciative." That is, I can realize wisdom by sharing what I have learned with others. The wisdom I have is rooted both in my intuition and in my experience. It takes both to possess wisdom.

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

I guess there have been two peak experiences that have shaped where I am today. One was when I first volunteered in my early 20s to work with the Literacy Council in Washington State. I don't know where my interest in volunteering came from because my family hadn't been involved in it. But it was there that I found I wanted to give something back to my community. My work over the years at Hospice was another, on-going peak experience. I enjoyed watching and observing so many people doing volunteer work and gained a great appreciation

for just how valuable this has been to the organization's mission and our community.

- 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?**

From what I've observed, a lot of people come here and very shortly develop a rich and full life without volunteering. They're on the golf course or on the tennis court or in restaurants enjoying themselves. Yes, there are so many retirees with all of this valuable experience, but they have a full life and don't take the next step and volunteer. I also believe there are a lot of folks who don't think about volunteering because they have never done it. I think we need to find ways of directly engagement all of these kinds of people and letting them know how valuable their contributions can be to our community. I don't have any specifics for direct engagement, but we might look at social groups and attempt to tap into them.

- 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?**

I believe it is true. Western Nevada County lacks the snobbery of other areas my partner and I have lived. Everyone here gets on well and is friendly. And there is as tendency to "buy local" that stems from the strong sense of community. Another reason we love it here is the natural beauty.

When my partner and I had first lived earlier in Sonoma County, there were mostly Fords, Chevys and pickups running around. Then the reputation of Sonoma County started to draw others. Within a short time these vehicles were replaced with Mercedes and Jags, and the merchants and restaurants wanted nothing to do with the locals, not even cashing their checks. This is one of the reasons we left Sonoma and moved here.

- 21. Is there anything else you'd like to add or ask before we close?**

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