

EMERGING LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITY: INTERVIEW WITH JULIE BAKER

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 am a 12 year resident of Nevada County and reside outside Nevada City in an unincorporated development called Manzanita Diggings. Previously my family and I lived in Nevada City, but we decided to move outside of town for more space. We found property with a pool, a guest house and, most importantly, lots of room for our three sons. We enjoy the expansiveness and privacy of where we live, but are fortunate to be close enough to walk into town.

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

I am 43 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 New York City and raised on the Upper West Side. I grew-up in a beautiful 1920s Art Deco building on the ninth floor, an amazing historic building. We lived on 72nd Street, which is a two-lane road. The other side of the street was the Dakota, which is the oldest apartment building in Manhattan. It is where John Lennon lived and was killed. Leonard Bernstein lived there as well. As a child, I remember watching the Macy's Day Parade from the window and enjoyed watching the floats going past at eye level. They were so close that I could see the patches on the floats.

I had a pretty privileged upbringing. However, my family was not super wealthy and worked hard for what they had to maintain our family lifestyle. We lived on the West side, while people with real money lived on the East side. We also had a summer home in Woodstock, while the privileged had houses in the Hamptons. My parents owned an advertising agency together, and it was a boutique firm primarily for the arts industry including galleries, museums, cultural festivals, and lots of musical organizations. The business started in 1947 and evolved from typesetting to graphic designs over the years. Neither of my parents were artists themselves, but that is who they spent their time with. They loved their work, which was their passion.

My parent's business was very successful. It was the 70s and 80s, and there was a lot of money to be made. I was exposed to a diverse world of music and arts, and it provided for a fast upbringing and lifestyle. I went to clubs when I was young and had a rebellious side as a teenager. As a family, we would spend our summers and holidays at our country home in

Woodstock, where the infamous festival was created. It was a very artistic town. I would not consider my parents to be hippies, but they were liberals living in a very artsy world.

My father, a German who came to the US during WWII, was almost 60 when I was born. He was very much into the arts and was not sporty. As a little girl, he would take me to the Plaza for dinner and then to the opera. He was very old school and he talked a lot about local and national politics. Living through World War I and II, he also talked a lot about history. I would quiz him on what it was like to grow up in a very wealthy family in Germany during World War I. My mother was from the Bronx and was 17 years younger than my dad. She was 39 years old when I was born and had grown-up very poor during the depression in Bronx, New York. As a couple, they brought forward a very different perspective on how money was to be managed.

I went to an all-girls private school, located in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I started there in fifth grade, and there were only 49 girls in my graduating class. A lot of lawyer's and banker's kids attended this school. There were five all-girl private schools in Manhattan, and mine was considered to be the most liberal.

After graduating high school, I knew I wanted to go to college in California. I was rebellious and wanted to get as far away as possible from what I knew. I would joke that it was the Mountain Dew commercials with the incredible beauty that brought me there. I went to UC Santa Cruz, a beautiful campus with no grades. I was 18 and it was a really good fit for me at that point in my life. I was very politically active on campus, got involved in the radio station, and became one of the assistant station managers. I also had a radio show where I would talk about current issues. I wrote my thesis on rape and gender discrimination in the Criminal Justice System and graduated with a degree in American Studies.

I traveled by myself to Europe for two months between sophomore and junior years. On the trip, I met a young girl who had been an au pair for a family. She had been raped by the father and blamed herself. I thought it was so terrible and sad that she didn't know she was the victim. When I returned from that trip I decided to be a counselor for women and developed a strong interest in social work. I ended-up running a program for women who had been raped and subjected to incest. It was a women's crisis support center in Santa Cruz. I was 21 years old, and the work was very hard and emotionally draining. I was finishing my senior year sitting home waiting for the crisis phone to ring when all of my friends were partying and having fun. It was very intense work, and I was getting very depressed and coming to a fork in the road.

While in college, I returned to New York for a few summers and worked in art galleries. One summer I worked for a woman named Diane Upright, a scholar in the arts world and director of an art gallery. I got a call from her telling me she had a stack of resumes from Yale and Harvard students who wanted to work for her, but she wanted me. I had a big decision to make. Should I stay in Santa Cruz and become a social worker or should I go back to New York to work as a receptionist at a modern art gallery that sold Picasso's and would put me back into the "elitist" world? My parents had come out for my graduation,

and I was torn. They were in their hotel room and my mother confronted me saying, “You need to come back to New York. You’re depressed.” Then my father said, “You like things too much, and you can’t make money being a social worker.”

I chose the job of receptionist at the art gallery and went back to New York. After a year or so there, I went to Christie’s, an auction house. During this time I was finishing my thesis and living alone on the Upper East Side. I was also volunteering at the Phoenix House, which was a drug abuse treatment center. I started a literacy center there because I always felt privileged and wanted to give back. And I explored getting my masters degree at NYU, the Galletin Program, where you create your own major. At that point, I was still at Christie’s and thought I would continue on the path of being an auctioneer specialist.

Then, my parents wanted to retire from their business and move. Times were changing and technology in the industry was quickly advancing. My mother asked if I would come into the family business. I had always said no, I would not do that. But my father was at the point of not being able to keep-up in the industry and couldn’t work a fax machine or a computer. So I decided to leave Christie’s and go into the family business as a trial, with my brother serving as a salesperson. At the same time I was also attending NYU and learning about business. I had a great teacher who taught me about management styles, and it opened my whole world in learning how to be a leader and manager. I was 25 and, in hind-sight, now recognize how young I was to take over a business. At this point, I had also met the man who was to become my husband. We just fell in love. He moved to New York in September, and in December we got engaged.

I was soon running the business. It was incredible in terms of experience because I was so young. At the same time, I had gotten married and started to have kids. It was a very stressful, hard time. I would lie in bed crying and would go to my parents saying, “I can’t do this.” My mom kept reassuring me, “Yes you can, we believe in you.” It was the early 90’s when I took over, and it was right when the stock market crashed. Fortunately, I was able to turn the business around by diversifying. I was concurrently going to NYU learning about business practices and applying it to the business. I was able to make it work financially and turned it around. In six years, while having children, I built the business back up to 12 employees. In retrospect, it was an amazing experience. I was able to succeed because my mom didn’t say, “We’ll shut it down.” She’s a very strong woman, who taught me to have a voice and not sit quietly in a corner. This has served me well.

Those were stressful times. My husband was getting his degree in architecture, and we were living on one income. I was working until 8:00 or 9:00 every night. The difference between doing business here and in New York is that if you’re not doing your job, somebody will take your business. This was very intense, and I was burning out. I realized I was leading the life my parents wanted me to lead, not the life I wanted. At that time we were living in a garden apartment in Brooklyn with bars on our windows. It was tiny and very expensive. After great thought, I sold the business to my now ex-sister-in-law. She was a business woman and recognized it was a good gig. I was desperate to get out, and my mom was very supportive of my decision. The life I envisioned for myself was to live in the country.

We left New York right after I had my second son. After moving to the Bay Area we started coming to Nevada County where my husband's family lives. His father and mother both grew up in Nevada County, and they are very hard working people with strong roots here. They also own a lot of property, including a mortuary, and my husband's father is chairman of a bank here. Every time we would come to Nevada City we would leave asking ourselves, "What are we doing? Why are we leaving this beautiful place?" During one of our visits, we saw a house with a wrap-around porch, white picket fence, claw-foot tub, and big back yard. It was what I had been dreaming about. We ended-up buying that house.

I had gone from being a high-powered business woman in New York City to being at home with 3 ½ year old and 3 month old sons. I quickly realized that alone wasn't for me. My husband came home one night, and I told him that it wasn't working. About the same time my brother-in-law was looking for work. He let me know he had interviewed for a job that he thought I would be perfect for. I went and interviewed for the position and got the job for a dot-com company called Tristream, based in Grass Valley. I became their primary salesperson at \$60,000 plus commission for four days a week. I didn't know anything about the internet because it was 1998. But I love a challenge, so I learned every acronym under the sun and ended-up working there and riding the dot-com wave. I was the company's 8th hire and we grew to 30+ employees. My clients were Cisco and start-ups. I would wake up at 5:00 a.m. Monday morning, drive to San Jose, and get back home when my children were asleep. I was learning and making money while being successful. But I came to realize that I had once again gotten caught-up in a world that was driven by the money motive rather than being home with my husband and kids. I remember being at a meeting with several new employees where we were going around the table introducing ourselves. I burst into tears because I started sharing how I never got to see my kids. I was back in the world I did not want to be in.

Then my dad died. I hadn't had a lot of experience with death, so it made me stop and realize mortality is real and you only have one life. I had always wanted to own an art gallery so I called my mom and asked if she would help to make it happen. She said she would, so I quit Tristream and mapped out what I was going to do. I opened a contemporary art gallery in Grass Valley called Julie Baker Fine Art. Art was my passion and I enjoyed being around it. Because I understood marketing and sales and how to deal with people and manage employees, I felt I was ready to make the gallery a success. My task was to curate the shows, select the art, market and sell it. From the beginning I knew I couldn't only depend on Nevada County to buy art. I went to Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and took the art I was selling on the road. People would come who were decorating their home, major art collectors, curators of museums or corporate collections. I could go, and within three days do \$80,000 in business. That's how my business was built. Then, it got to the point where I realized most of my business was out of town. Those that I sold to locally, I could do by appointment. So I decided to close the shop on South Auburn Street and open a small shop in Nevada City. More than 400 people came to my opening, but then September 11 happened. Given the economy and the fact that people were no longer buying high-end art, I closed my business two years ago.

That was a very challenging time. For two years I did an art fair in December in Miami in coordination with a well known art fair called Art Basel. In January 2008, I did an art fair in LA and it didn't go as well. I opened Julie Baker Fine Art in New York in May 2008 and thought I could run it from Nevada City. Then Lehman Brothers closed, and because the art market in New York was so dependent on the financial market, I decided to close my gallery in 2009. I found myself at another crossroads in life. We had bought a new house and I thought I could do art sales by appointment, but the art market continued to on its downward turn. The phone wasn't ringing, so I had to get a job. I called my old boss at Tristream to let him know I needed a job, and he asked me to come back. There I was, 10 years later, back in the same cycle again.

By that time my husband was President of the Center for the Arts Board in Grass Valley. I watched him grapple with the organization, and he kept saying that the Center needed to do something different. The Center felt seemed like a business I could run, and I was hired to do marketing. I quickly learned that the Center had no management. Knowing the arts world and how artists operate, I put my hat in the ring for the position of Center Executive Director. I was hired and have been there for a year. While I served on several nonprofit boards here over the years, this has been my first experience running one. And I love it. The Center has turned around, is humming with activity, and is serving the community exceptionally well. This summer we have had kids making art all day long, a writing workshop, and dance practice all going on concurrently. We're also bringing business to downtown Grass Valley, and this feels really good.

I am highly motivated and committed to my passion. And my career has reflected the role that I played growing-up in my family. I was the youngest by six and eight years. My middle brother was really smart but not socially able to manage well, and my oldest brother had issues and hadn't done well either. Due to these dynamics, a lot was put on me by default. I was the only girl, and the only child who was thought able to take over the family business. It's interesting to reflect on this now that I am a mother. My oldest son is very bright. He's the oldest grandchild, and there are a lot of expectations on him. I can talk to him about those feelings because I understand from my own experience.

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

My parents were incredibly hard working. I do not remember them doing volunteer work, but my mom began volunteering as a mentor for small businesses after her retirement. I recall in my senior year of high school that I had to do some work study, and I volunteered at a literacy program in Harlem. But my real volunteer work began in college. I felt it was important to volunteer, and I also liked being busy and being stimulated. I liked learning something new and liked to solve problems.

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?

My biggest strength is my passion. I believe you have to care and be solution-oriented. I'm not a complainer because that's not productive. I also think I am good with people, a key part of developing good relationships and building a good team. I'm an honest person and have never been able to "play games," whether in dating or anything else. I believe my strengths are rooted in who I am as a person. It is my personal style. I don't think there's much of a difference between the way I am at home and the way I am at work.

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

I definitely feel I am a mentor. I strive to do this with the people I work with as manager and Executive Director. I like that I am able to pass on what I've learned. I also do a lot of mediation. The buzzword when I started at The Center was collaboration, but it felt like just a word. We've worked really hard to collaborate with other non-profits and work closely with other arts organizations.

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?

As Executive Director of The Center for the Arts, I work at least 60 hours a week.

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?**

I am most involved with The Center for the Arts and was asked to work for the organization. The Interim Director asked me to do marketing, first as a contract employee. But she wanted to leave, and the Board was about to do a search for her replacement. They didn't have the time or money to do a big search, so I said I would take the job if offered. At first, I didn't know whether I could do the job. Then, a light bulb went off and I understood the business model. Once I figured that out, it all made sense and I had confidence I could do it. Until then, I was struggling. The first thing I did was to talk with everyone who had been associated with the Center. I asked what had worked in the past and why they had left. I wanted to learn and understand the industry. Though I had been in the arts, The Center was different. I did my research and bought a bunch of books about running a theater.

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

First, describe the leadership role that you play.

I am the Executive Director and the only full-time employee. I'm the idea person and I see everything through the eyes of marketing. It's always about marketing, about meeting human needs.

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

When I first started at The Center, I spent a lot of time understanding business practices, which were few at that point. They were waiting for the phone to ring to rent the theater, but it just wasn't happening. The biggest challenge was understanding that you can't make a profit off a 300 seat theater when you're only charging \$20 per ticket. The average gross was \$6,000 a night, which is not a lot of money. The big questions were, "Do we need to exist? Are we needed?" Once we realized we needed to take some risks and bring in bigger shows, we were able to raise the price of tickets and began selling out. We brought in big acts at \$50 a ticket and found that people would buy them. I've got musicians who formerly didn't get a check at the end of a show because there was never any money. Now they are well compensated.

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

The first three months were pretty dicey. For me the roadblock was not understanding how The Center could be sustained. I'm a business person. Unfortunately, people who have always been in the non-profit world often don't understand the difference between corporate and non-profit business models.

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

Turning around the reputation of The Center has been the most satisfying. When I first got there, people were down on The Center and nobody wanted to work with us. We had a terrible reputation in the community, but it wasn't so much from the patron perspective. For me, it was the artists' perspective that was really bad. Nobody wanted to work with us. It feels really good to have turned that and the business around and to have happy staff.

We recently debriefed after Kris Kristofferson to see what we did right and wrong with his concert. What's important, we found, is that both patrons and artists need to have an awesome experience. If we do both of those things, we've had a successful night.

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?

Making a difference inspires and motivates me to engage in civic activities. Certainly there's part of me that's ego. I like attention, but that's not my only motivation. I feel that I really drove The Center to change. I believe my leadership changed the course of The Center, and that its making a difference. I didn't write a check to accomplish this. I worked to do it by using my brain.

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

No, I do not. I love what I do. Of course, finding a balance between my kids and my work is always a challenge.

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

Personal satisfaction... that I am making a difference.

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?

Fortunately, I get to do something that I love to do. The arts are my passion.

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 do. I'm at another crossroads in terms of trying to figure out whether I should dissolve my business, Julie Baker Fine Art, because I like what I'm doing at The Center so much. I

would really love to bring more arts organizations in our community under The Center's wing because there are so many of them here. I feel capable of doing this, that I can run multiple programs. Eventually, when my family and I move, I would want to run another arts center. We have no plans of moving anytime soon.

- 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?**

Stressing out about the small stuff - I've learned that all business goes up and it goes down and you have to be comfortable riding that wave. If you believe in what you are doing and work hard enough you will get the desired results. Sometimes things don't go as planned but you have to learn how to bounce back. You also need to learn how to disconnect and find ways to relax outside of work. Achieving some work/play balance is important.

- 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?**

Empowering people is an important quality of a leader. That's something I have to improve on because I'm very capable and tend to think, "I'll just do it myself." It's not that I don't delegate, I'm happy to do that. But I have a pretty healthy ego, so I like to take things on. I need to work more on empowering the people around me so they also can have a feeling of success. In fact, team consensus-building and empowerment are two things I need to work on because I tend to try to grab attention.

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

None. I didn't grow-up with any religion. My father was a member of the ethical culture society, so it was all about morals and ethics. I believe things happen for a reason.

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

The biggest difference for me as I progress in my career is that I don't panic as much as I used to. Thinking back to my 20's, when I was running a business and would lose a client, I would have been devastated. Today, I realize things go up and down so I don't panic as much. I also learned early on from my boss never to yell. I'm not calm all the time, but there's no point in yelling.

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

Not leading. Not providing the management, the guidance, the expertise that is required. There has to be a place where the buck stops, and you have to be a decision maker. You have to be someone who is not afraid to make a decision.

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

I read a lot and study the theatre industry. I go to conferences, read professional journals and blogs. There's so much information on the internet now. You can't **not** know what you're supposed to be doing in your business. I am also constantly trying to improve and keep fresh. People get bored fast. The Center happens to be in a successful period right now, and I'm doing my best to maximize that. I'm trying not to lose any ground. There are often unforeseen things that happen that you can't control, and good leaders recognize that. They recognize that they are going to fail, that they can learn from failure, and not to be afraid of failing. If you become afraid of failure you won't take risks, and if you don't take risks you're not growing. People have to get comfortable with not being perfect.

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

Being the Executive Director of The Center has been a peak experience. In this position, in this part of my career and life, it's feeling like we, The Center, are making a difference for the community. In terms of helping businesses, other non-profits, the artists, helping the kids and providing a place that is safe for the kids.

Honestly, I think the peak experiences for me are when I fail. Because I had a really good run with my gallery here and was very well known for it, I made a mistake. I opened the gallery in New York, it failed, and I lost money. All of the sudden, I was in debt and felt like I was in a hole, felt like I failed. There were a couple days of feeling sorry for myself, then I achieved victory again.

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

Not much.

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 learning from experience while understanding that some things are out of your control. It is being confident and decisive because you know you have the wisdom to proceed. It is also an ability to listen and learn from others, opening yourself up to new experiences. If you find yourself saying, no, I won't do that I have tried it before and it does not work, I would say it is time to retire!

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?

I believe individuals do not volunteer due to competing priorities in their life. This includes the need to work instead of volunteering. Sometimes I think it's a lack of a philanthropic spirit or understanding. I'm pretty shocked about how few people in my core group of

friends are civic-minded. They volunteer in their kids' school, but that's pretty much it. It's amazing to me because there's an incredible older generation here who do volunteer, but not my generation so much. Another reason individuals do not volunteer is lack of confidence. I've seen it with some women who have been at-home moms. That's the thing about feminism. We have had this opportunity to be workers. Some chose that, while others who didn't have ended-up feeling resentful. So they're under-appreciated.

There are many non-profits for this small community, and people are really spread thin. Anybody who is identified as having a dime or a brain gets picked to be on a Board. My family and I get that, but most of our friends don't because they're under the radar

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 do feel we have a unique community here. From my perspective, it's mostly to due to the presence of highly diverse arts. We have an incredibly strong foundation for a variety of arts, and you don't usually have arts so represented in a population this small. I think the natural beauty and our weather also makes it unique. We get four seasons, and there are not many places in California that have this. Ours is also a very vocal community.

It's so different for me here, having grown up in a giant city. I love the feeling of going to the farmer's market on Saturday and knowing everybody and feeling I'm part of a small community. There are also many excellent opportunities for education for children. It's an interesting spiritual community as well. There are many different perspectives, from yoga to church. And politically it's a fascinating place. There are super conservatives on one side and an intense counter-culture on the other. It's so interesting here. It's a great place to be.

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

None.