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What’s your skill? Everyone has something to give

CONTRIBUTED BY SECOND HARVEST FOOD BANK

“W hat can I do?” Sometimes we hear this in response to a daunting problem, like the number of people in Santa Cruz County who can’t always afford enough food for their families. But sometimes it means, “How can I help?” As in, “What can I do?”

The truth is, everyone has something to give. It takes money to fund the important work nonprofits do, but we simply couldn’t help the community the way we do — feeding 55,000 people each month — without the work of volunteers.

Some people have special skills developed through their work and career. Some have hobbies or interests they can apply to volunteering. And some just have life experience and a willingness to help.

Second Harvest and other nonprofits need them all.

Watsonville resident and mother of two Yvonne Perez decided she had a skill she could donate. She knew about Second Harvest, and knew people who needed a little extra food at some time in their lives.

“When a family’s income decreases,” says the food bank, “the people who need help the most may be unable to pay rent, and there’s not enough left for groceries — the fix is in on the Food Bank.”

So Perez wanted to help the organization that helps people she knows. And Perez knows flower arranging. She’s been a volunteer for eight years.

Before becoming a full-time mom, she created floral arrangements for an event management company. She offered those same skills to Second Harvest, and soon her creative centerpieces were decorating the rooms at Second Harvest’s events, helping the group to connect with the community and raise funds for their work.

“Sometimes it’s not money,” Perez says. “Sometimes it’s our talents that make a difference.”

Longtime Watsonville resident Ann Bornstein’s skills are more technical. Before she retired 20 years ago, she worked as a computer modeler for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Their mathematical operations were quite different from Second Harvest’s work fighting hunger and malnutrition, but Bornstein knew she could help.

“I know statistics. I know spreadsheets. And every organization needs to manage and crunch data,” Bornstein said.

“It feels good to put my skills to use helping a nonprofit feed the community.”

Likewise, Santa Cruz Independent Database Developer Jerry Vilhauer enjoys donating his expertise to Second Harvest’s mission. Though he contracts to implement a key database, he volunteers extra hours to train staff to operate what he’s built.

“I’ve always enjoyed working with the folks at Second Harvest,” he said. “They are a fun bunch to be around and always show their appreciation.”

Vilhauer and Bornstein contribute technical skills, but the needs of nonprofits run the gamut. Second Harvest is fortunate to have top chefs cook dinners for our annual Chefs’ Dinner fundraiser, skilled photographers help communicate our work, and volunteers with great interpersonal skills educate the public and strike partnerships with the community.

One of the Food Bank’s biggest ongoing needs is people to sort the produce we receive from local farms and bag it at our operations in Watsonville for the children, families, elderly, and others who help across Santa Cruz County. And that requires no special skills — just a kind heart.

“People bring all sorts of interests and abilities to volunteering,” reflected Lily Marmion, Second Harvest’s Volunteer Services Director, “but the most valuable asset of all is the desire to help.”

To find out how you can help Second Harvest Food Bank feed the community, contact Lily at lily@foodbank.org or 761-7110, extension 205.