

## Getting to Know Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County



Bread at a recent food pantry distribution. (Photo by Tara Fatemi Walker)

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When people think of Second Harvest Food Bank, they might picture the ubiquitous collection barrels seen across the county during the holiday season — popular with individuals and businesses to donate to those in need. Or they remember Food Bank trucks that deliver fresh produce and other items daily to food pantries.

Let's get to know some of the Food Bank's people: a couple recent distribution recipients and two Board Trustees.

75-year-old Silvana, a France native who first came to the U.S. in 1969 and raised her kids in Capitola, shows up every week at the Thursday noon Food Bank distribution at Santa Cruz Bible Church (it was held at Inner Light Church until a year ago when the church closed its physical location). She has been coming for eight years. Of the bounty she receives, Silvana only keeps a couple of items for herself.

"I share the rest with my neighbors," she says. Silvana lives at Via Pacifica, an Aptos senior housing complex. There are many seniors who don't drive anymore or are sick and can't access Food Bank resources. "By bringing food to them, it helps them — financially and otherwise." She rotates the food between different households, so everyone benefits. "It's so rewarding to see people become happy when I bring them food."

Sharing the food aligns perfectly with the distribution's goal, says Dan Moher, who serves as pantry co-director with Miguel Aznar and Lois Smith. "When you come here, we want you to take enough to fill your pantry and more for a neighbor or friend, mostly we want you to feel valued and respected," says Moher. He estimates the distribution helps feed 500-600 people weekly.

"Working with Second Harvest is like magic," says Aznar. "They are focused and eager to get us the food we need. Every Thursday morning one of their big trucks rolls up. The always-friendly driver rolls huge pallets of produce, canned food, dry goods, and even eggs and frozen foods right next to our 14 tables."

Mother and daughter Teresa and Jill (names changed for confidentiality), who live together in Santa Cruz, have been coming to the pantry off and on for 15-plus years. "It's how I survived raising six kids," says 58-year-old Teresa, who is a past pantry volunteer. Lately, they've needed extra help — CalFresh benefits, which increased during the pandemic, have decreased. "Plus, with prices of food and gas going up, it's been even harder," says 30-year-old Jill. "And everything is more expensive: our water, phone, and PG&E bills, and our rent," adds Teresa.

At the farmers market-style pantry, attendees choose what they want. Numbers by each item specify the maximum each family can take. On a recent Thursday, maximums were (among others): four packages of bread/rolls/muffins, four soup cans, four peanut butter jars, and two bunches each of fresh carrots and broccoli.

Teresa enjoys the self-selection format. "This way, you only take what you'll use — nothing goes to waste. And the volunteers are always smiling and helpful. This is such a valuable resource we are so grateful for."

## **Karina Diaz Alvarez**

The newest Second Harvest Food Bank board member, Karina Diaz Alvarez is a first-generation college student in her third year at UC Santa Cruz. She joined the board in December for many reasons including the fact she herself is a past recipient of assistance. "As someone who has greatly benefited from food banks, especially during the pandemic, I find the issues that Second Harvest tackles to be close to my heart," she says. "So many rely on food banks to survive. By offering free food to those who need it, lives are being saved and burdens are being eased. To be part of this work means having the chance to directly impact those who have incredible stories of resilience."

A psychology and legal studies double major with a minor in Global Information and Social Enterprise Studies, Diaz Alvarez's experience working with nonprofits started with UCSC's Everett Program in 2020. She continues to work as an Everett coordinator and engagement fellow. This has helped her develop leadership and public speaking skills, in addition to learning that "everyone has a part to play, and we work as a team. I see this in the Food Bank too."

She first learned about Second Harvest's enormous impact through her research assistant role at UCSC's Blum Center, where she organized multiple focus groups centered on food insecurity. "Listening to the stories of over 100 participants, I heard about positive experiences people had with the Food Bank."

Diaz Alvarez is excited about making a difference. "To have a voice is to be heard and have the power to create change. As a Latinx woman, I will always make sure I am heard and that my actions lead to positive and radical change."

## **Bob Norton**

The longest-serving board member, Bob Norton's tenure began with a 2009-2017 term, including serving as Board Chair. His involvement started in 2008 when then-Board chair Jeremy Lezin invited him to visit Second Harvest. "I was immediately impressed with the organization's passion, commitment, and efficiency." He was asked to join the Development Committee which was tasked with developing funding. "My 36 years in the grocery industry gave me retail, purchasing, distribution, and food product management experience, which fit perfectly with Second Harvest."

When Norton was invited back to the board for a second term in 2019, it was specifically to begin the process of evaluating the methodology – and ultimately the selection – of the person who would take CEO Willy Elliott-McCrea's place when he retired. "McCrea is a legendary figure in Santa Cruz," says Norton. "The task force did an amazing job and was very fortunate to pick the perfect replacement, Erica Padilla-Chavez."

Norton has high praise for local ag community members that provide fresh vegetables and fruit — enabling Second Harvest to achieve its mission of decreasing food insecurity through healthy produce, other healthy food, and resources. He is proud the Food Bank is a key partner for the Family Engagement and Wellness Center, which serves Pajaro Valley Unified School District families. “The community’s first free store, it opened last year in Watsonville. This is the future of food banking. The ability to self-select one’s own food in a safe environment and plan one’s own meals promotes self-determination.” In addition to food, the center offers supplies, CalFresh enrollment assistance and nutrition education.

His favorite role as a trustee? Supporting Padilla-Chavez and her staff. “Watching them successfully face the challenges of feeding healthy food to 25% of Santa Cruz County’s population is beyond fulfilling,” he says. “Attending food distributions and seeing gratitude and relief on the faces of families receiving the food is the greatest reward. Witnessing Second Harvest firsthand has shown me we are so fortunate to live in a county with such incredible compassion from those that have the means and are willing to donate so that those less fortunate can have the fuel to improve their lives and their families’ lives.”



The three co-directors of the Second Harvest Food Bank Thursday noon distribution at Santa Cruz Bible Church. (Photo by Tara Fatemi Walker)