Service Above Self
Questions for Erica Padilla-Chavez, CEO, Second Harvest Food Bank

By Jess Brown

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JESS: Where did you go to college? What was your major?

ERIC: I almost didn’t go to college, because I didn’t know I could! If it weren’t for Mr. Wong, my British Literature teacher at Watsonville High I would not have applied and been accepted to UC Berkeley where I majored in Sociology and minored in Public Policy. After Berkeley, I attended Golden Gate University in San Francisco where I received a master’s in public administration.

JESS: Where were you born and raised?

ERIC: I was proudly born and raised in Watsonville, CA.

JESS: What was your childhood like?

ERIC: My childhood was a fun one. I remember being outside a lot. Early in my childhood, I recall spending a lot of time with family who lived at the Santa Maria Ranch on the outskirts of Watsonville. I loved running around the ranch with cousins and I recall marveling at the hills. They are still my favorite hills. Sometime before I became of school age, my parents rented their first home in the city’s center. My neighborhood had a lot of children. I began my schooling at Mintie White Elementary and in the third grade, transferred to Moreland Notre Dame.

JESS: Were you interested in helping others while you were growing up?

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JESS: You are now the CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank. What did you do prior to assuming that position?

ERIC: I returned to the Pajaro Valley after being away for two decades. Before integrating into leadership roles in nonprofits, I worked for the County of Monterey Health Department, where I administered various programs. I consider myself a public health advocate that believes that every person should have optimum opportunity to thrive in life. Prior to coming to Second Harvest, I was leading a nonprofit organization that offered therapeutic and social services to children, youth and families in the Pajaro Valley. During COVID, I worked to organize a pantry within that organization and partnered with Second Harvest to hold regular food distributions at that site. I am proud that this partnership still exists as most families served by that organization are food insecure.

JESS: What is the elevator speech that explains Second Harvest Food Bank?

ERIC: Second Harvest is committed to helping every individual in our community have an opportunity to thrive. We do this by inviting our community to help us ensure that every neighbor has access to healthy nourishment.

JESS: When did Second Harvest become an organization in Santa Cruz County?

ERIC: Second Harvest was formed in 1972. We are proud to be the first food bank in California and second in the nation!

JESS: At Second Harvest, what is the ration of fresh foods provided versus processed foods?

ERIC: We strive to have 65 percent fresh food distributed. We are particularly focused on ensuring distribution of fresh produce because we are committed to promoting health and wellness. It is becoming more challenging to meet this goal for a myriad of reasons but our partnerships with our friends in ag are the key to helping us meet this objective.
JESS: Recently, you have had to increase your capacity to serve food to people in need due to the floods. How did you ramp up for such an occurrence?

ERICA: I recently noted that our food bank has experienced emergencies of various kinds. From floods to earthquakes to cannery closures, Second Harvest has developed the ability to respond to the needs of the community as they arise—it’s in our organizational DNA. During the most recent floods, Second Harvest responded by coordinating access to warm meals for the evacuation centers throughout the county. In addition, our team held door-to-door food distributions to households within the flooded areas and we have expanded our distribution sites and volume of food.

JESS: How many families do you normally serve in one month? And how many did you serve during the floods?

ERICA: We averaged 57,000 people per month prior to the floods. In January, that number climbed to over 63,000. We get to see first-hand the impact of the crisis in our neighbors, and we will always be ready to provide them with nourishment. We are always prepared.

Erica with her family. (L-R) Sister June, Dad, Mom, Erica and her husband, Alejandro

JESS: The organization, Ag Against Hunger, was founded to help facilitate an easy method for growers and shippers to donate extra produce to the Food Banks. Is Ag Against Hunger still an important partner of the food banks?

ERICA: I have learned that the Ag Against Hunger was born out of our food bank with a desire to better coordinate distribution of fresh produce to food banks throughout the central coast. I am interested in working with our agricultural partners and fellow colleagues of our central coast food bank to figure out how to re-establish the model that Ag Against Hunger once held. The idea of coordinating distribution so that all central coast counties have access to fresh produce in an equitable fashion makes a lot of sense to me.

JESS: Who has been the most influential person in your life?

ERICA: My mother. My mother left her country at the early age of 17 to help support her mother when she became a widow. My mother single-handedly provided financial support for her family of eight siblings back in her home country of Mexico. She’s bar none the most focused and dedicated woman I know. She is my inspiration.

Erica with her family. (L-R) Sister June, Dad, Mom, Erica and her husband, Alejandro
JESS: What is your motto?

ERICA: Borrowing from the Rotary motto, I really relate to the 'service above self' motto. It’s truly how I strive to live my life.

JESS: Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

ERICA: I am known to often say these words: “let’s be intentional”. I know I may overuse it, but frankly I really believe in this phrase. I believe I live with intention and as such I constantly invite others to live, work and play with intention. There’s one life to live!

JESS: You live in Soledad, are you and your family involved in that community?

ERICA: I do live in Soledad now and hoping to make the return to the Pajaro Valley. The Salinas Valley has been the place where my husband and I raised our family. It’s an amazing and bountiful valley full of lovely people. Just like my parents did with me, we raised our children to be of service to others. As a family, we have been involved in many community initiatives at schools and in the community at large. I am proud that my children have grown up to understand that if we want healthy and prosperous communities, we must contribute. I am proud of many things but most of all, I am very proud that we designed and built a Hartnell Community College Center here in Soledad. I’ve served on the college board for over 13 years, and I recognized that for many individuals, access to higher education can be a barrier. By bringing a college facility into Soledad, children grow to understand that going to college is the next natural thing after high school.

JESS: Where do you see Second Harvest in 10 years?

ERICA: I see Second Harvest being present and visible in the communities that need our presence. I see our agency working to expand partnerships with organizations that are in the business of helping people thrive in all ways. I see Second Harvest celebrating the incremental wins that we are collectively taking to reduce hunger insecurity in our communities.