

Service Above Self

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

By Jess Brown



Erica Padilla-Chavez

JESS: Where were you born and raised?

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

JESS: What was your childhood like?

ERICA: 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?

ERICA: Yes. My parents were always of service whether at church, school or in our neighborhood. I grew up watching them working with others to implement activities, usually for our church or community organizations. In fact, I recall being 11 years old and helping pack bags of food at the food bank. Being of service was a family core value. All my siblings are dedicated to serving others and I believe that is by design, thanks to the values our parents instilled in us.

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

ERICA: 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.

Second Harvest is committed to helping every individual in our community have an opportunity to thrive.

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

ERICA: 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?

ERICA: 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?

ERICA: 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?

ERICA: 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?

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

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.

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: Provide an example of how Second Harvest has changed the lives of those you served.

ERICA: Recently a team of Second Harvest volunteers and staff went door-to-door to the neighborhoods impacted by the floods. One of the stories that left an impact was that of a family that had lost their refrigerator due to water intrusion into their kitchen. The family had been away during the weeks of rain and floods and returned to what appeared to be a ruined home. It sounded like they were in shock but when the Second Harvest team showed up to their door, the family expressed gratitude for the help. Imagining the stress that the family held at that moment and the feeling of being supported by our team is why we do what we do. We are here to support our neighbors, especially in times of need.

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



Erica receiving a donation from Graniterock

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: When and where are you the happiest?

ERICA: I think growing up in Watsonville was among the most cherished moments of my childhood. Clearly, raising my children in the Salinas Valley has been among the most fulfilling decades in my adult life. Now that we are empty nesters, I am ready to discover a new life chapter.

JESS: If you could have dinner with three people (alive or deceased), who would you invite?

ERICA: Great question! I think I would want to hold a conversation with Martin Luther King, Kobe Bryant and Sister Teresa of Calcutta.

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. ☺



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