



Opinion

Erica Padilla-Chavez: We are the Food Bank

By: ERICA PADILLA-CHAVEZ  June 8, 2023

What is normal? I thought things would return to normal following the three-year Covid pandemic and devastating Santa Cruz Mountain fires. I thought we'd survived the worst. But nothing could have prepared me for the first three months of 2023 and the meteorological disasters that swept through Santa Cruz County in the form of historic flooding.

Atmospheric rivers and bomb cyclones repeatedly bombarded the county causing havoc as early as New Year's Eve. Flooding in Watsonville and other parts of our County interrupted what would otherwise be a celebratory time as we welcomed a new year. Then, on Friday, March 10, the water level in the Pajaro River surpassed the levee, leading to a breach and partial collapse. This was not only a humanitarian crisis, but an economic one as well. Amid environmental climate change, this community – my community – was hit extremely hard.

Through it all, the Santa Cruz County community rolled up its sleeves and got to work – filling sandbags, checking on distressed and displaced neighbors, volunteering time at evacuation centers, preparing hot meals, donating money, and leading with their hearts. I often say that The Food Bank is not only the hard-working Second Harvest staff, or generous donors, or grateful recipients, or volunteers, Second Harvest is the whole community – We are the Food Bank – and this organization belongs to all of us.

But we didn't do it alone. The partnership and collaboration of community-based organizations throughout the county allowed Second Harvest to fill the most basic needs of our displaced Pajaro Valley neighbors. It was community in the purest sense of the word.

As the floods receded, and the news outlets moved on, our flood-affected neighbors were still unable to return to their homes and jobs. The continued support and work done by our Second Harvest staff, in collaboration with our partners, specifically Martha's Kitchen and Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes, providing hot meals and meals-to-go for our displaced neighbors, continued to amaze me. More than 80 emergency food distributions were organized and made possible by the hard work of the people that work in these great grass-roots organizations. I thank the Second Harvest team, Martha's Kitchen, and Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes, for your "can do" attitude and unwavering partnership.

Now that the ground is dry and the levee is scheduled for repair, I reflect on our response, and I am proud. We should all be proud – proud to live in this special place that honors community, partnership and collaboration.

As I reach my one-year tenure as CEO at Second Harvest Food Bank and reflect on the past few months, I am honored to lead The Food Bank – and our community – through challenging times and into a more secure future.

Simply said: We are the Food Bank.

Erica Padilla-Chavez is CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County. Second Harvest Food Bank was the first food bank in California and the second food bank in the country. On average Second Harvest serves 65,000 Santa Cruz County residents each month. The Food Bank website is thefoodbank.org. Padilla-Chavez's opinions are her own and not necessarily those of the Pajaronian.

[Link to original story.](#)