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Second Harvest Celebrates 50th Anniversary With Party to Honor Retiring CEO

by Kathryn McKenzie



Willy Elliott-McCrea started as a driver and warehouse worker

July 5, 2022 – Santa Cruz County’s Second Harvest Food Bank just hit a huge milestone—enough food to make 200 million meals has been distributed to county residents in need during the past 50 years.

Not only is the food bank observing its half-century mark this month, but it’s also poised to start a new era, as longtime leader Willy Elliott-McCrea gets ready to retire and new CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez comes on board.

Both Elliott-McCrea and Padilla-Chavez will be feted at a 50th anniversary party for Second Harvest, with a celebration of service for Elliott-McCrea as well as an opportunity to meet Padilla-Chavez. An official community meet-and-greet for Padilla-Chavez is planned for August.

Tickets are now available for the 50th anniversary reception and dinner to be held July 21 at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds in Watsonville. On the same day, an open house will be held at the Second Harvest facility in Watsonville with tours, cooking demos and other activities; **advance registration is required**.

Padilla-Chavez, currently CEO of health nonprofit Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, will officially join Second Harvest on July 18. Her tenure overlaps Elliott-McCrea's until his official retirement at the end of the month. Padilla-Chavez, a Watsonville native with more than two decades of experience in the health and human services field, was selected after a nationwide search.

"I can't imagine a better person than Erica to lead Second Harvest forward to the next level. She has a truly impressive track record of building partnership and a lifelong passion to ensure health and well-being for every member of our community," says Elliott-McCrea.

Padilla-Chavez will be carrying on a truly impressive legacy at Second Harvest. Founded in 1972, it was the first food bank in California and only the second in the nation.

For the past 44 years, Elliott-McCrea has been part of the food bank, rising through its ranks in an unusual path that took him from truck driver and warehouse manager to CEO. A beloved figure in the county's nonprofit community, Elliott-McCrea first came to this area as a student at UC Santa Cruz, and says it was "a total accident" that he came to work for the food bank. "Their driver got a DUI and they needed someone," he recalls. He was hired in 1978.



Elliott-McCrea (right) in front of the Food Corps' 1st office

Elliott-McCrea made himself indispensable as he organized the warehouse operation for maximum efficiency. At the same time, he was also flexing his community organizing skills in his Seabright neighborhood in Santa Cruz. That unique combination of experience eventually led to him becoming food bank director in 1988 and five years later, CEO.

At the time, Second Harvest served a five-county area since there were not yet any other food banks in the surrounding region. As the years went on, food banks were founded in Monterey, San Benito, Merced and San Luis Obispo counties, which enabled the Second Harvest staff to then focus solely on its home county.

The organization moved to its present location in Watsonville several years before the devastating 1989 earthquake struck, damaging homes in the area so severely that thousands of people were abruptly left without a safe place to live. Residents camped in backyards and local parks. Others couldn't get to stores because of road and bridge damage. There was an overwhelming need for food.

Second Harvest commandeered additional warehouse space for the 2 million pounds of food that was made available for the emergency situation, as well as finding additional places to store it all, and working with a National Guard unit and VISTA volunteers to get it out to those affected, Elliott-McCrea recalls.

"It was godawful," he says of the weeks after the Loma Prieta quake, with many people suffering post-traumatic stress as aftershocks wracked the area. "My hair turned white overnight, at age 35. But maybe," he says with a smile, "it's because my daughter was born that same year."

There have been many more challenges for the food bank as the years have passed, everything from the floods of the 1990s to wildfires to the ongoing COVID pandemic. Currently, Elliott-McCrea says, crippling inflation and high rents are sparking a new demand for food assistance. Since the start of the pandemic, Second Harvest has seen the need in the community double, and the organization is now providing food assistance to 75,000 people a month.



Willy Elliot-McCrea and Rep. Jimmy Panetta meet with National Guard troops who came to work at the food bank at the start of the pandemic in 2020

He's proud of the changes that have come about during his tenure: more emphasis on nutritious food and produce, more outreach, and new "cooking clubs" where people can learn to make meals with what they receive from the food bank. Of the food that is now distributed, more than 60% is fruits and vegetables.

Elliott-McCrea has also been active on the state level, as founding president of the California Association of Food Banks from 1995-98 and recently becoming chair of the association's board of directors. He was also one of the co-founders of Ag Against Hunger in an effort to connect the agricultural community with food assistance programs.

Funds are now being raised to renovate the Community Kitchen at Second Harvest, so that it can be used more fully as a commercial-grade presentation and teaching facility, and people are being invited **to donate to the project** as a way to honor Elliott-McCrea's legacy of service. Plans call for the current kitchen to be expanded and brought up to date so that it can be used to spread the message of good food and good nutrition.

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