



News Local News

Elliot-McCrea reflects on decades of service with Second Harvest

By: JOHANNA MILLER 📅 July 14, 2022



Willy Elliott-McCrea, who will retire after more than 40 years of service with Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, shows the progress at the future site of the nonprofit's community kitchen. — Tarmo Hannula/The Pajaronian

WATSONVILLE – Willy Elliott-McCrea has been with Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County since 1978.

During that time, he worked as a truck driver and a warehouse manager before becoming director in 1988. He saw the organization through a number of crises that increased the need for food distribution, including floods in the 1980s and 1990s, the Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989, the 2008 recession and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

At the end of this month, Elliot-McCrea will retire and officially hand off the position to new CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez, just as Second Harvest celebrates its 50th anniversary and the milestone of funding 200 million meals in that time.

“On one hand, I just feel like the luckiest guy in the world that I’ve been able to make this my life’s work,” Elliott-McCrea said. “I get to jump up out of bed every morning and do this work ... It’s so fulfilling. Not everybody gets that opportunity. So that’s been really special.”

Second Harvest was the first food bank in California, formed in 1972 to distribute USDA surplus food commodities through the Community Action Board. By 1979 there were 13 banks nationwide that formed the national organization now known as Feeding America. There are currently 200 food banks across the U.S.

Elliot-McCrea said his time at Second Harvest was marked by community involvement and watching the organization evolve.

“When you look at where the food bank was and how it’s grown, every aspect of the community is involved,” he said. “It’s neighbors feeding neighbors, making sure everyone is fed. That’s love.”

But looking ahead, he said, there is plenty of work to be done.

“There are a lot of things we have done well, but there are also a lot of opportunities,” he said. “I think there’s an opportunity to work closer with the families we serve. Part of what perpetuates hunger and poverty is families feeling like they don’t have agency. How do you build community engagement for folks who have felt marginalized? How do you give them more say in what we do, more ownership?”

There are also a number of outside forces that lead to hunger and malnutrition in the region, he added

“Given the cost of housing in Santa Cruz County, hunger isn’t just a poor person’s problem, it’s a middle class problem too,” he said. “When people get pinched trying to pay the rent, they cut back on fresh fruits and vegetables. We live in the land of plenty – the ‘Salad Bowl of the World.’ There is no reason anyone should be going without healthy food in Santa Cruz County.”

Second Harvest will give a fond farewell to Elliot-McCrea at a special 50th anniversary reception and dinner on July 21 at 4:30pm at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 East Lake Ave., Watsonville. The event, which also includes dinner, dessert and a no-host bar, will also include presentations by local and national leaders.

"It's a chance to look back, and forward," Elliot-McCrea said. "Erica will also get a chance to meet the community in her new role. Lots of food bank employees, board members, and friends will be there. It's just going to be a really fun evening. I've been saying, since I decided to retire ... I don't want to leave before the big party."

Also on July 21, the community is invited to see how Second Harvest operates at an Open House at its facility at 800 Ohlone Parkway in Watsonville. This will include tours, cooking demonstrations and more from 1:30-4 p.m. Registration is required.

Elliot-McCrea says he is "excited, on so many levels" to pass on his role at Second Harvest to Padilla-Chavez, who starts this Monday.

"She was born and raised in Watsonville," he said. "I remember the first day I took her around the food bank, she was meeting all the staff ... She already knew so many of them from growing up. It's that sense of coming home."

He also thinks Padilla-Chavez, the former CEO of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, will be able to build on the platform Second Harvest has created over the past 50 years.

"We've set up a good foundation for the food bank, but I think she'll really take it to new places," he said. "She's got deep relationships within this community."

Even after retirement, Elliot-McCrea's legacy at Second Harvest will continue. The Willy Elliott-McCrea Kitchen Renovation Fundraising Campaign is currently raising money to renovate the organization's community kitchen into an upgraded, commercial-grade presentation and teaching facility.

The space is slated to be completed before Thanksgiving of this year.

"If you make sure half of what you eat is fresh fruits and vegetables, 80-90% of your health problems can go away," Elliot-McCrea said. "That's why this kitchen is so important. How can we teach people to prepare healthy food their families will enjoy? We're really excited about what this project could be."

Looking back, Elliot-McCrea says the real "hunger hero" at Second Harvest is the community as a whole.

"To some degree, I've had the honor of sitting in this role," Elliot-McCrea said. "But the food bank has always been about the community itself. A lot of my job is to just step out of the way and let people connect. This work has been truly a work of love by the community and to say the obvious, we couldn't have done it without them."

For 50th anniversary celebration tickets and to register for the Open House, visit thefoodbank.org. For information about sponsorships and table purchases email richelle@thefoodbank.org.

