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OUR TOWN

## HOW AN INTERNSHIP INSPIRED SECOND HARVEST CEO

written by See Below | September 2, 2022



By Tara Fatemi Walker

Erica Padilla-Chavez started as Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County CEO in July.

She came from Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, where she had served kids and families of the Pajaro Valley since 2015. Her new role is a natural progression as she continues meeting the needs of these deserving individuals and even expands her impact.

## Career Change

Several factors inspired Padilla-Chavez to embrace this opportunity. As the pandemic worsened, she heard from PVPSA staff that clients needed food and didn't have money for rent.

"We had to pivot to facilitate meeting clients' needs," she said.

She reached out to The Food Bank and was impressed with how fast they set up a pantry and bimonthly food distributions. Padilla-Chavez realized Second Harvest Food Bank helps many partner organizations achieve their individual missions.

"Every organization we partner with uses the distribution of food to better accomplish their own goals (for example PVPSA fulfills mental health needs)," she said. "So, it's win-win!"

Another reason she joined The Food Bank was to "work alongside stellar leaders who are committed to making people's lives better."



*Erica Padilla-Chavez • Photo Supplied By Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County*

## Salud Internship

Padilla-Chavez attended Watsonville High, UC Berkeley, and Golden Gate University—the latter for a master's in public administration. As a high school junior, she had a Salud Para la Gente internship opportunity that made her realize she was passionate about working with the community.

It was the height of the HIV epidemic. Salud was seeking students to disseminate education and prevention strategies throughout the community, including teaching individuals who used needles how to clean them.

"I was trained on how to engage in conversation and how to use motivational interviewing techniques," she said. "I talked to our homeless population that was living in the Watsonville riverbanks, and discovered I really like working with people."

Because of this positive experience with Salud, Padilla-Chavez thought medicine would be a good field to pursue.

"I was pre-med early on at UC Berkeley. After a year-and-a-half of doing pre-requisites and pulling my hair out," she laughs, "I realized it wasn't really medicine I was after. It was connecting with people."

Shifting to a sociology major, she worked with organizations that were meeting food insecurity needs and other public health needs of the homeless population in Berkeley and nearby.

After college she returned to Watsonville and worked in the nonprofit sector developing leadership abilities among youth.

“What I found was that issues for addressing the needs of youth and their families were similar to those for the homeless,” she said.

She realized no matter what group she’s working with, a primary focus needs to be identifying linkages and supports in the areas they and their families need.

“This perspective—understanding a person needs not just one thing, there’s an interconnectedness to what really can support them to help them thrive—is something I use in how I approach my work and my life,” she explained.

At Second Harvest Food Bank, she looks forward to developing partnerships with organizations that help individuals and families flourish, “especially for the people we’re taking care of here at The Food Bank.”

### **Parental Influence**

Padilla-Chavez’s parents, who are immigrants, had a profound influence on her life.

“I was born and raised in Watsonville,” she said. “During Pajaro Valley’s history, the economic ecosystem has experienced challenging periods. The earthquake, but also the exodus of canneries from our community in the 1980s.”

Her parents were cannery workers, so this left her family in a predicament. She was 11 years old.

“We were food insecure, but I didn’t know it,” she said. “My parents did an outstanding job helping me and my siblings feel safe and secure.”

Her parents volunteered at Second Harvest Food Bank, packing food for friends and neighbors affected by the closures.

“As my eldest sister and I assisted my parents in the food distribution, I thought I was just helping our friends,” she said. “I enjoyed it. We were allowed to pack a bag of food for ourselves with the leftovers. After a few times I realized, ‘we actually are benefiting from this too.’ Today, I know there were a couple things going on. One, it was my parents’ way of ensuring we had something to eat. But even more importantly, it instilled in us the importance of taking care of our neighbors.”

She believes her framework of understanding what people need comes from this exposure.

“I’m proud to say all of my siblings are community-centered people as a result of wonderful parents, ones who taught us this country has given them—and us—an opportunity to make our lives something that can fulfill us individually and simultaneously make the world a better place,” she said. “My parents are my biggest mentors.”

### **Passion for Equity**

During Padilla-Chavez’s tenure as CEO, Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance expanded from a staff of 20 serving 2,500, to a staff of more than 65 serving 7,000. Her drive is undeniable.

When she returned to Watsonville after college, it struck her that many issues she witnessed as a youth were still present.



"I asked myself, how can this be?" she said. "We need to work differently. Because the economic insecurity and food insecurity are still here, the lack of good-paying jobs is still here, mental health needs are on the rise. My drive comes from understanding I have the experience of being born and raised here and understanding the challenges for me and the people I grew up with...and then returning and finding there were still indicators that needed focus."

She disagrees with the adage 'things are the way they are.'

"That would mean I accept that people are going to have to live with what they have," she said. "And I don't accept that. We can change the outcome of individuals. This is facilitated by the opportunities we provide. Not just economic ones: All opportunities. Like the fact that I even had an internship opportunity at Salud that propelled me to be where I am today. I want the best for people. It's that simple."

When asked to discuss her leadership style, she says, "I facilitate partnerships to do good. I thrive on bringing people together with diverse perspectives and opinions and developing solutions to address a common problem. Hunger insecurity is complex, it's a symptom of something deeper. I'm interested in engaging folks to determine how we can begin to address root causes to the food insecurity issues of our county."

### **Home and Family**

Padilla-Chavez, 47, lives in Soledad.

"We are fortunate we were able to raise our family nearby. Twenty-one years ago, I wanted to buy a house in Santa Cruz County. Like many, I couldn't afford it...we found a community in the Salinas Valley. What was supposed to be a two-year 'equity-garnering opportunity' ended up becoming a lifetime. Housing and home ownership are important for all families, including the people we support at Second Harvest Food Bank. It's getting harder and harder."

They are exploring a move back home, hopefully in the next year.

"We're going to see how we can get ourselves back to Santa Cruz County," she said.

She is a self-described empty nester and Cal Poly mom. "My son's about to turn 21, he's at Cal Poly SLO. My daughter, 19, is at Cal Poly Pomona."

Over the years, she has improved her work/life balance. "Sometimes I can be in the office for 24 hours and still feel I need more time. I'm a workaholic, but I've learned over the course of my career that setting boundaries for my family is important."

When time allows, she enjoys jogging, walking, and spending time in nature. "Gardening is a hobby I haven't had enough time for lately," she said. "Now that my kids are returning to school, I look forward to getting back to growing my tomatoes, my lettuce, and my strawberries."

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### **Meet Erica Padilla-Chavez**

Interested in meeting Erica? Come to an open house/meet & greet on Sept. 15, 4:30-6:30 p.m. at **Second Harvest Food Bank**, 800 Ohlone Parkway, Watsonville. Light hors d'oeuvres and beverages will be served.