THE STRENGTH OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

BY CHARLOTTE HAIER

“In a healthy community, people can rely on each other and solve problems together” says Jenny Ocon, Executive Director of the UpValley Family Centers. Healthy communities celebrate each person’s unique potential, and give everyone the opportunity to contribute and succeed. This is the vision that inspired the founding of the St. Helena Family Center back in 2005, and that still drives the organization, now called the UpValley Family Centers today.

BUILDING A LOCAL NETWORK OF SUPPORT

The northern Napa Valley is a world-renowned tourist destination. But it’s also still a small, rural community – which means that many social services just aren’t available locally. Most government agency offices, for example, lie a 30 to 45-minute drive away in Napa or Santa Rosa. When you work full-time, have young kids at home, or face any other obstacles to making that drive, those services can be impossible to access.

In the early 2000s, the Calistoga and St. Helena Family Centers (CFC) had started bringing much-needed social service providers to their office at the Calistoga elementary school, helping vulnerable local families connect with resources to help them grow stronger and happier. Seeing the difference being made up there, a small group here in the Calistoga and St. Helena neighborhoods determined that their community needed something similar, and that they would be able to do more for, with, and in their communities together – and in 2014, the two Boards of Directors moved forward with a merger. They named their new organization the UpValley Family Centers, and hired Jenny Ocon as its first Executive Director.

Jenny brought with her a strong background in family-focused social work and community development. She has leveraged this expertise to grow UVFC into an organization that makes lasting, transformative change in the local community. In addition to creating a network of locally available social services, UVFC today provides education opportunities for kids and adults, guided referrals and information, immigration support, health and wellness outreach, case management for families and seniors, and financial literacy and tax preparation services. UVFC also plays a crucial role in “locally owned” communities to wild fires and other natural disasters: in both 2015 and 2017, it disseminated important information in English and Spanish, connected clients with relief and recovery resources, and supported households through the long process of rebuilding their lives after losing a home to the fires.

JOINING FORCES

The Calistoga and St. Helena Family Centers had always been close partners. So close, in fact, that the idea of joining forces kept popping up. Both centers realized they would be able to do more for, with, and in their communities together – and in 2014, the two Boards of Directors moved forward with a merger. They named their new organization the UpValley Family Centers, and hired Jenny Ocon as its first Executive Director.

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UVFC has a variety of volunteer opportunities available for anyone who is interested in getting more involved!

Visit www.UpValleyFamilyCenter.org or call 707-985-5010

Youth Diversion program – which gives minors charged with a misdeemeanor the chance to complete a community service program and clear their criminal justice record. Its UpValley Partnership for Youth is a collaborative, community-based effort to address youth substance and alcohol abuse. UVFC also collaborates with Nimbus arts to host an annual Dias de los Muertos community celebration, and with Rianda House to provide services to local seniors. And as of recently, UVFC partners with the St. Helena Farmer’s Market: market staff support a gardening project for UVFC’s weekly preschool playgroup, and the playgroup facilitators organize fun kids’ activities at the market. None of the Centers’ work would be possible without these partners – or without a corps of dedicated volunteers: community members who are committed to supporting their St. Helena neighbors.

As the one-stop-shop where so many people come together to build a happy future for their community, Jenny and Loraine feel fortunate to see first-hand the ability that each and every individual has to contribute meaningfully to society – to see and deepens the connection that St. Helena neighbors have toward one another. As the UpValley Family Centers celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Calistoga Family Center that started it all, Jenny and Loraine are proud of what the agency has achieved, and committed to continuing its work. With an unwavering commitment to dignity, respect, and equity – and a firm belief in the idea that each individual possesses unique strengths, UVFC plans to continue providing the place where anyone can go to find the support, resources, and tools they need to create a future of opportunity for themselves, their family, and their entire community.

“IT TAKES A VILLAGE”

Ultimately, UVFC’s vision is to engage the entire community in improving life for all of our neighbors. That includes other local organizations and institutions: UVFC partners with the St. Helena Unified School District, for example, to provide a tutoring program for primary and elementary school students, as well as youth mentorship at RLS and St. Helena High. In partnership with the Police Department, it runs a

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