

THE STRENGTH OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

BY CHARLOTTE HAJER



"In a healthy community, people can rely on each another and solve problems together," says Jenny Ocón, 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 Family Center (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 St. Helena realized that their community needed something similar, and began to build a vision for a St. Helena Family Center.

"As one of us put it," founding Board member Loraine Stuart recalls of those early conversations, "we wanted to be the 'Safeway of non-profits': we wanted to offer a place where people of all ages and all backgrounds could go, and get what they need to live well."

The CFC's core focus was school-based services for students and their parents, but the St. Helena group determined that their community's greatest need was financial literacy and stability. In early 2005, before they had even secured an office location or hired paid staff, the new St. Helena Family Center began offering free tax preparation services and launched an inaugural financial literacy class at Stonebridge Apartments.

The Center quickly became a trusted resource hub, both for clients in need of services and for community members who wanted to

give back. The Presbyterian Church provided office space at 1440 Spring Street, local residents signed up to volunteer, and the Center's founding Board of Directors hired its first staff members.

Like the CFC, the St. Helena Family Center prioritized collaboration: through partnerships with social service providers in Napa County, it worked on building a strong network of resources available right here in the community. The center modeled itself on the concept of a Family Resource Center, or FRC. Found throughout California, FRCs are community hubs that provide a variety of services, all tailored to clients' stated needs. They strive to give families the tools and supports they need to grow stronger, so they can raise healthy kids and contribute to a happy community. "Our job as a family center is to recognize the contribution that each person can make to the community," Jenny summarizes, "and to provide the opportunity to make those contributions happen."

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 Ocón 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 as "second responder" to wildfires 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.



EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING TO CONTRIBUTE

Jenny explains that it's easy to talk about providing services as though you're solving problems for people, but that's not what UVFC tries to do. Its goal is to "make sure that people feel their own voice, and have an opportunity to take ownership" of solving the issues they and their neighbors face. "It isn't just about providing a safety net, but also about creating opportunities for people to share their own vision for what their community should be."

"When people feel vulnerable," Loraine adds, "they tend to stay hidden:" they don't express themselves or participate in the community. UVFC provides a safe space for people to open up about their struggles and figure out a path forward. Staff build trust by providing bilingual, culturally sensitive services, and by demonstrating a commitment to dignity, respect, and equity. The safety they create gives clients the confidence to contribute more fully to the community – to improve not just their own wellbeing, but that of their neighbors, too.

Over the past several years, Ricardo Neves had hidden himself away. As the sole breadwinner for his family, he had left them all behind in Mexico to find a job in Napa that would provide for them: his wife, two children, a grandchild, a nephew, and a niece whom he loved like a daughter. But unable to return home for a visit, Mr. Neves was left with both crushing guilt and devastating loneliness when his niece was killed in 2014, followed not even a year later by the sudden and unexpected death of his wife.

Mr. Neves retreated into sadness. When the 2015 tax season came around, he paid someone to file them for him. It was a quick process – but he was left with a hefty tax bill that he had no way of paying. After the same thing happened on his 2016 return, he stopped filing his taxes altogether. Last year, the IRS caught up with him. Mr. Neves looked for help, but no one seemed to have an answer for him. Disillusioned, he ignored the debt collection notices for a while. But when he learned about the free tax services provided at UVFC, he decided to try again.

"I want to do what's right," he told UVFC's Economic Success staff. "This country gave me a job that supports my family, and I want to contribute my fair share in taxes. But I don't know how I can pay all this." Sensing that there was more to his story, the UVFC team dove into his past returns and discovered that the paid preparer in 2015 and 2016 had made several mistakes that left Mr. Neves with a much higher tax bill than he should have owed. UVFC talked with the IRS on his behalf, managed to reduce his tax debt to something manageable, and helped him file both his 2017 and 2018 taxes. Mr. Neves left feeling not only supported, but strong and capable of doing his part for society.

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

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



Visit www.UpValleyFamilyCenter.org or call 707-965-5010

Youth Diversion program – which gives minors charged with a misdemeanor 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 Día 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 their society – and to witness the deep compassion that St. Helena neighbors have toward one another. As the Up-Valley 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.

- Paver Installation
- Retaining Walls
- Repairs, Cleaning, and Sealing
- Free Estimates



Hardscapes

707-260-9151
jblhardscapes@yahoo.com

Lic #705055

