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News

Food bank manager announces retirement

By Joel Metzger

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Posted: Wednesday, May 13, 2009 10:34 AM CDT

The beloved and respected director of the Calaveras County Resource Connection Food Bank has retired after 20 years of service.



Billie Westernoff. Enterprise photo by Joel Metzger

Billie Westernoff, 69, started as a volunteer and quickly rose to manage and build the program that is known locally, as well as nationally, for its attention to the needs of families and for creating ways to make good nutrition a part of everyday life for all of Calaveras, a press release stated.

"It's not a 9-to-5 job," Westernoff explained. "But it's a job with rewards that are impossible to describe. Making the decision to end this part of my life was the hardest thing I ever had to do. But it was time."

For 25 years, Calaveras County families and residents have relied on the food bank and its innovative nutrition and education programs. Nearly everyone involved in food and nutrition issues in the county came to know Westernoff and her staff.

"The food bank staff are incredible," Westernoff enthused. "Just incredible. I wouldn't have retired at this time if I didn't feel they could handle it. I wouldn't have left anybody in the lurch. I couldn't do that to the families that need us in the community."

She announced her retirement Friday and said her plans are to finally spend quality time with family, including her husband, five children, 18 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, with another expected in the coming months.

"My grandkids need me," Westernoff said. "We are going to have a new little boy coming in August. I'm so excited."

The Resource Connection recently opened a new 6,000-square-

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foot state-of-the-art food bank on George Reed Drive in San Andreas, signaling a new era in the growth and stability of the organization formerly known as the Human Resources Council. Construction of the food bank was made possible by funds from Community Development Block Grants, Housing and Community Development, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and private donors, many of whom have special ties to Westernoff. The building includes space for food storage, distribution and administrative offices.

"The new building has been in process for three years," Westernoff said. "It definitely was a crowning achievement and amazing community project. To see the fruition of my dreams come true – a real food bank building with storage capabilities – was like heaven for me."

"It's difficult to imagine the food and nutrition programs at the Resource Connection without Billie," said Shirley Stroble, Resource Connection board president, "But she's left us a great legacy and a model program."

When Westernoff came to the organization, she planned to volunteer for the legal self-help program, but someone was needed to work in the then-nascent food bank, which was mostly distributing USDA commodities. "It was more like a 'food pantry' than a real food bank," Westernoff said. After a few months, she recognized that this work was really "her calling."

In 2007, along with Shirley Runnings, who directs the federal Women Infant Children program at the Resource Connection, Westernoff testified in Washington, D.C., to the value of fresh fruits and vegetables for very young children and the importance of providing funds for such produce. The program, known as Mother Infant Child Harvest, was piloted in Calaveras County and was funded by Calaveras First 5. The program was used as the model to add fruits and vegetables to WIC vouchers nationally.

"Just imagine," Westernoff said. "We thought it was a good project for our county, and now it will affect children across the nation."

"There are too many memories for me to recount," Westernoff said, "but one stands out among them." A few years ago, she found a man rummaging through the Dumpster near the old food bank. She brought him in as she opened the door and helped him gather food. He was a Vietnam veteran battling the results of exposure to Agent Orange. He lived in a trailer with his dog. He began to come to the food bank monthly. Eventually, he rebuilt his life, reunited with the mother of his child and came by the food bank with a donation of \$100, continuing to donate over the years.

Recently, the Resource Connection announced (along with its new name) a new mission statement: "Engage families. Empower communities. Enrich lives."

"The Resource Connection is on the move," Westernoff said. "It's an exciting time for the organization. My heart will always be with everyone there. I'm grateful to have been a part of its history and of helping to move it ahead. I'll miss it, but my memories are strong, and I'll still be in the area, so I'll be part of it in a different way."

In a word of advice to those continuing to operate the food bank Westernoff said to remain focused on the people.

"Always look to the clients and families that we serve and keep

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them foremost in your mind," she said. "When people come to the food bank they are hungry for more than food. They are hungry for respect. Remember that we are there to serve."

A celebration for Westernoff will be held from 3 to 5 p.m. Friday at 206 George Reed Drive, San Andreas. The public is welcome to come say goodbye to Westernoff and wish her well.

Contact Joel Metzger at jmetzger@calaverasenterprise.com.

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