

805

LIVING



**GIVE
THANKS
GIVE
BACK**

20

Questions for Those Who Make a Difference

20 Questions is *805 Living's* signature, virtual conversation connecting people who make our community such a special place. The premise is simple: Four 805-area residents participate, each learning a little bit about one of the others before asking that participant five questions about life and work. In turn, each answers five questions from someone else.

The anniversaries of a number of California wildfires as well as the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks are upon us. The events were devastating, but each one led to communities pulling together to become even stronger. This month, we connect individuals working in different local organizations that are helping to rebuild our neighborhoods and the lives of our neighbors. Read on for their 20 questions and 20 answers.

A conversation among leaders of four local charitable organizations explores the culture of compassion and heroism in the 805 region.

PRODUCED BY LYNNE ANDUJAR AND ANTHONY HEAD
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

1 What initially drew you to take the position of president and CEO of VCCF?

My career began in finance, including co-founding a financial firm in 2008. One of the most life-changing moments for me during those years was working with a client who had no heirs or family. I posed the question, "What would you like to happen with your estate when you pass away?" That simple question spawned a deep exploration on what he found most meaningful in life, and eventually my client donated over \$2 million for helping hospitalized infants and their families. His gift was transformational for the nonprofit's ability to fulfill its mission, and it was also deeply fulfilling for him as he was embraced by a new community of support; his passion for life increased dramatically. Since that first experience I have been committed to marrying my love of finance and serving as a trusted fiduciary with my passion for philanthropy. Serving as the president and CEO of the Ventura County Community Foundation is a perfect match.

2 Do you find that the one-year marks of tragic events, such as the Thomas, Hill, and Woolsey fires, and the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill, become active periods for donations from the public?

When a disaster strikes, on average, 73 percent of donations* are contributed within the first few weeks and are directed toward immediate relief. Unfortunately, the recovery and rebuilding process can take up to 10 or more years and requires the most resources. Following the disasters, we knew that there would be significant and long-term needs for our fellow community members to rebuild their lives. This is why, long after media and public attention have shifted away from our community, we are here.

Vanessa Bechtel

President & CEO
Ventura County Community Foundation
vccf.org

As president and CEO of the Ventura County Community Foundation (VCCF), Vanessa Bechtel oversees her organization's commitment to help eliminate social problems by bringing together donors and local nonprofits, as well as offering more than \$1 million in student scholarships for college and career training. **Ronnie Stone** asked her these questions.

3 How is Ventura County doing now?

Ventura County is definitely a resilient community, but there remains a huge amount of work to do to help our community recover and rebuild. To that end, I don't believe I was alone in a heightened sense of anxiety I felt as I watched the fires break out in our region [last month]. I found myself waking every hour just to check my phone to make sure our community was doing okay. I think a big part of the apprehension is that there are still so many in our community who are grappling with extreme challenges from our prior and very recent disasters. Ventura County has been hit extremely hard these past two years and our local nonprofits are making a Herculean effort to help and are definitely feeling the strain.

4 What first goes through your mind when you hear about a local, developing story that you know will negatively impact a number of our residents?

The first thing that goes through my mind is a reminder to really listen. I firmly believe that listening is the most critical step, followed by asking direct and thoughtful questions, and then, with the right information at hand, identifying the tools and resources we can bring to the table to collaboratively be of service and offer our support.

5 Is there something in your past that led you to this path?

When I think of the event that started me on this great adventure, I turn to how my life was forever changed by a philanthropist I've never met who believed in the power of music and provided me with a violin and lessons when I was just 2 years old. That person's gift turned into a gateway for me that opened up many doors, such as college, my first job, and a love of music that provides deep meaning and joy in my life.

**According to the Center for Disaster Philanthropy in Washington, D.C., 70 percent to 80 percent of donations are contributed within the early part of a disaster.*





Abe Powell

Co-Founder/Executive Director

Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade

sbbucketbrigade.org

In the aftermath of December 2017's Thomas fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, flooding caused an enormous debris flow. On January 28, 2018, Abe and Jessica Powell began coordinating a community response—in the form of the Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade—to this environmental emergency in Montecito. Since then, more than 3,000 volunteers have cleared mud from homes, assisted families in locating lost belongings, and helped restore area trails and walking paths.

Vanessa Bechtel asked Abe Powell these questions.

6 How did you begin the task of successfully clearing more than 100,000 yards of devastating debris?

We began our journey the way all great journeys begin: one step at a time or, in our case, one bucket after another. The magnitude of the problem was simply overwhelming. My wife and I knew the right thing to do would be to help our neighbors dig out, but it is not enough to want to help your neighbors. You actually have to get out there and do something to actually help them. So we got our shovels, called our friends, and started digging, house by house, block by block. We started at one friend's home with some buckets and wheelbarrows and a small group of friends. When the community saw what we were doing, something clicked. By the following Sunday, more than 1,000 volunteers had shown up to help us dig.

7 How did you approach onboarding more than 3,000 volunteers?

I was a volunteer firefighter and had learned the Incident Command System (ICS) that first responders use to coordinate emergency response. We decided to adapt that system for spontaneous volunteer deployment. Our modified ICS system focused on chain-of-communication as opposed to chain-of-command. Volunteers are working for free, can leave anytime, and rarely have much training for this kind of work. ICS is a top-down model for command and control of professionals. Our system is a ground-up model, focused on safety, flexibility, and communication to make sure that volunteers get the information they need to accomplish relief goals in the field. We call our system Community Self-Rescue.

8 What was been the hardest lesson you learned these past two years?

This work is too important to be done only by volunteers. We need to build capacity for coordinated, effective community response to crises quickly. After three months, we realized that we needed some paid organizers to do the behind-the-scenes work that organizes, equips, feeds, and deploys large groups of volunteers. We realized that for this work to continue, the Bucket Brigade needed to become an ongoing professional operation.

9 What was it that best prepared you for the immense challenges you must have faced in your heroic work?

Engagement and persistence. The Bucket Brigade system is the product of 23 years of community building, organizing, and action around neighborhood preparedness, environmental protection, and recognizing climate change. One of the key lessons I have learned over the years is knowing when to take action. There comes a point when it is go time, and I believe that we, as a nation, arrived at that point in 2017—the worst* year for natural disasters in U.S. history. Some responses went well, like the one in Montecito. Others didn't go well and people suffered. Now that we are engaged and we know what works, we need to stick with it.

10 What advice would you pass on to others who might be considering a career in work similar to yours?

Begin it now while there is still time. Existing disaster-relief systems are getting routinely overwhelmed. Community organizing around grassroots resilience is needed more than ever before. We need community leaders to step up to this kind of organizing, training, and deployment as a full-time job all across America right now. It's go time.

Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade co-founder and executive director Abe Powell teams up with the organization's mascot and trail inspector, Hazel, by San Ysidro Creek in Montecito.

**According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2017 tied with 2011 as the worst year for natural disasters recorded in U.S. history.*

11 Can you say more about your stated goal for the Southeast Ventura County YMCA becoming the “cornerstone of our community”?

Every community needs a hub, a third place, as Starbucks says. You have your home, your place of business, and we are hoping the Y becomes everyone’s third place. The Y is much more than a place to exercise. At the Y we build relationships, impact lives, and strengthen our communities.

12 How has the Y impacted others in a way that is not well-known in the community?

In 2018, Southeast Ventura County YMCA launched a summer academic achievement program, Find My Genius. Offered at no cost to the families, this five-week program provides underprivileged children who are not reading at grade level with a summer filled with academic growth (with a focus on math and literacy), enrichment (like robotics and swimming), and other summer camp fun! It is truly one of the most impactful programs offered at the Y.

Ronnie Stone

**President and CEO
Southeast Ventura County YMCA/California Strong
sevymca.org/californiastrong**

As president and CEO of the Southeast Ventura County YMCA, Ronnie Stone also oversees California Strong, which was formed to raise money for those affected by last November’s shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks, the Woolsey and Hill fires of Los Angeles and Ventura counties, and the Camp fire in Northern California. It has raised over \$2.2 million dollars and presented grants to more than 650 California families. Stone has spent more than 25 years within the YMCA organization. **Marsha Bailey** asked him these questions.

13 What are some of the long-term needs among those most profoundly impacted by recent disasters, and are you hoping to address those needs as well?

What we have seen from many of those affected by the fires is that this is going to be a very long road ahead. There is a lot of healing and a lot of financial and personal stress. Thanks to the support of the Ventura County Community Foundation, all families affected by the fires were offered a year-long membership to our Y. The Y is truly their home away from home as they work tirelessly to rebuild their lives.

14 Can you share a story about the impact one of your grants has had on a local family?

At one of California Strong’s many check-distribution events, we met a young mom who had given birth within days of losing her home in the fire. She came in with her young baby, grateful for any and all support. Expecting a nominal amount, she was overwhelmed when she saw the check for roughly \$1,000. Five minutes after she left, she returned with tears running down her face. She hugged our staff profusely, saying she hadn’t known how she and her husband were going to cover rent the following day and this check would help her make ends meet. California Strong gave her stability and an opportunity to take a breath and continue pushing forward.

15 What’s helped you balance family obligations, your job at the Y, and your role with California Strong?

Immediately following the disasters, it was very difficult. Many of us worked very long days. It was what our community needed, so we did it without hesitation. Very quickly, we recognized the need to hire a program director to lead California Strong moving forward. This position has allowed us to continue advancing its mission and provide immediate financial assistance to California communities following disasters without compromising our existing programs.



Marsha Bailey

Founder & CEO

Women's Economic Ventures

wevonline.org

In 1991, Marsha Bailey created Women's Economic Ventures (WEV) in south Santa Barbara County to support women as they pursued their entrepreneurial dreams.

Today, WEV serves Santa Barbara and Ventura counties by helping women start or expand their businesses.

Abe Powell asked Bailey these questions.

16 What was the moment of inspiration that led you to start Women's Economic Ventures?

Starting WEV was the culmination of many things. I grew up at a time when women's roles were narrowly confined to pink-collar jobs like secretary, teacher, and nurse. Unless you were lucky enough to have a person in your life who convinced you that you could do anything or be anything, it was hard to break free from those stereotypes. I worked for the Santa Barbara Rape Crisis Center for five years and we worked closely with Domestic Violence Solutions. Through that work, I saw how much more vulnerable women were when they didn't have money of their own. I thought that if we could put more money in women's pockets, they would have more options and freedom to live the kind of lives they chose to live rather than being trapped by poverty or financial dependency on someone else.

17 Looking back 28 years later, in what ways do WEV's successes reflect your original vision?

One of WEV's goals, beyond business ownership, has been to create a supportive community to help women feel confident and competent; to become leaders not just in their businesses, but in the civic arena as well. For me, women's economic empowerment doesn't end with owning a business. It starts there. And while WEV has helped start or expand over 4,500 businesses, we still have a long way to go to achieve gender parity and that's going to require broader, more collaborative strategies and a powerful community of committed women and men to get us there.

18 What aspects of WEV's evolution have surprised you the most?

I think what's surprised me most is how entrepreneurship has become the center of so much attention. When we started, we didn't even call it that. We called it "self-employment." Most business schools were focused on churning out MBAs, not entrepreneurs. I thought program demand would probably diminish because, at some point, we would have served everyone who wanted to start a business. The challenge now is to continue to evolve to meet the economic needs of new generations of women, and that is likely to mean expanding the kinds of programs WEV offers beyond business development.

19 What was your greatest challenge in creating and growing this organization?

For the organization, the biggest challenge was convincing potential funders that women-focused business development could be a viable strategy to help women and their families move out of poverty and become economically self-sufficient. For me personally, I think my biggest challenge was asking for help. As a founder, I felt a lot of self-imposed pressure to have all the answers and solve all the problems. It was also difficult to ask for money face-to-face. I had no problem writing a grant or a fundraising letter, but asking directly was really hard, mostly because of the social taboos I'd grown up with around talking about money.

20 How has rising up to meet that challenge changed you?

I've learned that a leader doesn't solve everyone's problems for them. A leader listens, asks questions, and helps the members of her team develop their own problem-solving and decision-making skills. Having a strong team has allowed me to do many things at the state and national level that I couldn't have done otherwise. It was challenging in the beginning because I didn't know if WEV would work. Donors who liked the idea were willing to take a risk, but many let me know that after three years, we'd need evidence that our programs were effective. Once we had that evidence, I became more confident about what it really cost to do our work. Ultimately, facing my own fears helped me realize that whatever challenge came my way, I could figure it out—especially if I had help. ♦

Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and length.