

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Community foundation visionaries from Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties collaborate to speed assistance to residents of the Central Coast.

BY JOAN TAPPER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

Not long ago *Pacific Coast Business Times* founder Henry Dubroff and publisher Linda le Brock hosted a Zoom panel discussion with the three CEOs of our region's community foundations to look at issues they face—and collaborate on—in these unusual times. Vanessa Bechtel of the **Ventura County Community Foundation** (vccf.org), Jackie Carrera of the **Santa Barbara Foundation** (sbfoundation.org), and Heidi McPherson of the **Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County** (cfsloco.org) were thoughtful about the past, clear-eyed about the present, and inspiring about the future and what members of the 805 community can do to help. For this Giving Back issue, *805 Living* extends their conversation.



Jackie Carrera of the Santa Barbara Foundation

Have community foundations always worked together?

Carrera: Community foundations traditionally have been focused on building endowments for the community and guiding philanthropists. But over time it became obvious that we have a wealth of

resources beyond dollars. There was social capital built on knowledge and on issues.

McPherson: Being CEO of a foundation is a lonely position. We reach out to each other and ask, “How do you handle that?” Those professional relationships >

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“Decide how do you want to spend your time and assets to save the world.”

enable us to respond quickly when there's a disaster. I'm a huge fan of collaboration. It brings an enhancement of skills and uses of institutions.

Carrera: It's natural to partner across county lines. We have connections.

Bechtel: This is a special time. What moves me is that together we're much bigger than we are by ourselves. It's something we're seeing in philanthropy as a whole. Part of the evolution has been born out of real hardship.

Carrera: The disasters were devastating. The Thomas fire and the mudslide affected the physical infrastructure. People worked in one county and lived

in another, and their financial viability was affected. One thing that became clear was how interconnected we are—personally, financially, environmentally.

Bechtel: The 805 UndocuFund started after the Thomas fire and Montecito mudslides. It was a collective effort. About 10,000 families impacted by multiple tragedies were being served. None of us could do it by ourselves. Fundraising, casework—there's a division of labor that has allowed us to serve.

Then, the Census became an issue that called for real collaboration?

Bechtel: We were worried about Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, which were in the top 2 percent of risk of being undercounted. It would have had a multigenerational impact on everything from transportation to education. Each community foundation went into their community and worked with governments and other organizations. It was a massive effort. By working together we're now in the 95th percentile in the nation for an accurate count.

And now we're also dealing with COVID-19.

McPherson: COVID-19 has shined a light on: 1. food insecurity, especially for seniors, who used to be able to go to a senior center; 2. farmworkers, migrant workers, and hospitality workers and how important they are, though they are not afforded benefits; and 3. the digital divide. We're all learning something about these things. Needs don't stop at county borders.

Bechtel: Since COVID-19 hit, at least 100,000 people have been onboarded into the social service sector—people who have been self-sufficient have, for the first time, turned to nonprofits for food and housing. Partnering improves the strength and power of nonprofits.

“There's been an increase in a younger generation of donors and people who are new to giving.”

Heidi McPherson of the Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County





Vanessa Bechtel of the *Ventura County Community Foundation*

focusing on education—not just for caregivers but also for therapists, counselors, and everyone else, about their roles.

McPherson: There are opportunities for a Central Coast needs assessment of early literacy and homeless issues. For funding and education, data is crucial.

Carrera: Homeless issues also tie into Governor Newsom's Office of Social Innovation, which prioritizes statewide initiatives that incorporate regional information and strategies.

Bechtel: I think we'll continue to help on climate change, homelessness, early childhood education, and broadband access. It's surprising, but funding for broadband access exists. But how do you organize the response? Community foundations can connect people and resources.

I'm excited about technological solutions. Our region is truly innovative. The role that philanthropy can play is advancing technology that's not yet profitable but that solves a problem.

Is philanthropy itself changing?

McPherson: The community foundation space used to be for the very wealthy. Now it's a resource for multigenerational giving. People are not so wedded to tradition or to what their families have done. There's been an increase in a younger generation of donors and people who are new to giving and now have the means to support things they care about. More

and more, we're the trusted resource.

So what can we, as residents of the 805 area, do?

Carrera: Everyone has something to offer. You may see a problem and want to help but don't know what to do. Connect with your community foundation, which can identify needs that will partner with your goals. You can be a philanthropist with your energy, time, and ideas.

Bechtel: Start a relationship with your community foundation. We have a collective ability to move the needle at the local level. We all have the power to make an impact.

McPherson: Everyone can be a philanthropist.

Everyone can make a difference. You don't have to be a Rockefeller. Decide how do you want to spend your time and assets to save the world. ♦

“Since COVID-19 hit, at least 100,000 people have been onboarded into the social service sector.”

It connects philanthropists to new causes and draws attention to organizations that are grass roots in size but with a profound impact.

Carrera: Nonprofits are all trying to figure out how to survive. We collaborated by identifying regional business advisors who could provide resources to nonprofits and then businesses.

What are the issues that the three of you will be talking about and working on going forward?

Carrera: Economic development for the region. Retooling and re-skilling our work force. Also, a Santa Barbara Veterans Collaborative; there are 22,000 vets in the area. And there's a huge population of caregivers in the region as a whole. There's a caregivers' initiative