

## Grey Bears, Inc.:

# A Self-Help Program for Seniors

By MILDRED ANN SMITH  
Sentinel Women's Editor

The ancient Biblical custom of gleaning is going on right here in Santa Cruz County.

Add the proverb, "God helps him who helps himself"—put this together with nearly 1000 seniors, two imaginative young coordinators, growers and packers willing to donate surplus food, and a board made up of interested individuals and agencies — and you have the California Grey Bears, Inc.

The founders of Grey Bears, Kristina Mailliard and Gary Denny, say they got the idea from reading newspaper accounts of the thousands of gallons of milk being poured down the drain to raise prices; the tons of fruit and vegetables going to waste because of size, blemishes, insect damage or unprofitable last pickings.

"And we also realized that there are approximately 12,000 elderly people in Santa Cruz County alone who are living at the poverty level," says Kristina.

Why not put the two together?

From the grizzly bear emblem of California, they came up with the name of California Grey Bears, acknowledging that seniors are older but still feisty and to be reckoned with.

The whole thing began last September when Kristina and Gary staged the first Harvest Festival, asking people in the community to bring the surplus from their gardens.

"It was an old-fashioned community festival," says Kristina. "No money was exchanged and the younger people brought their surplus vegetables so that older people could take them home. Frank Gallagher of Project SCOUT helped with the enterprise and in all 400 seniors attended the festival at Harvey West Park."

Next came the Christmas Eve dinner for 1000 seniors at Civic Auditorium. The city donated the use of the auditorium, all the food was donated, and 100 volunteers cooked and served the dinner under the direction of Thelma Dalman of the City Schools Food Services.

Actually Grey Bears got a big boost from one of the cooks, Bob Johnson of Sunnyside Watsonville (a strawberry brokerage). After hearing details of the program, he made contacts in Watsonville and located five tons of food from various frozen food processors which they donated because it was mislabeled or had a damaged package.

Cold storage is provided by E. V. Moceo Company of Santa Cruz and currently biggest contributor of unprocessed food is J. J. Crosetti of Watsonville.

Operation Brown Bag came into being, patterned to a degree after Experience, Inc., of Monterey County.

Of the 950 Grey Bears who pay \$1 yearly dues, not all need the food each week. Statistics show that 625 seniors, 60 and over, receive Brown Bags each week containing fruit and vegetables. The average age is 73, 23 percent are disabled, and the Grey Bears themselves have contributed more than 4000 volunteer hours since February in their self-help operation.

Gary says the seniors go out in the field to help pick the crops (now mainly lettuce), help transport, package and distribute the food. Currently there are distribution points in Ben Lomond, Capitola, Live Oak, Freedom, and in Santa Cruz on the West Side and in the Seabright area. To get more variety, excess food is traded with the Monterey County group for other kinds of vegetables it might have.

Kristina and Gary work strictly on a volunteer basis — Kristina, a UCSC graduate, using savings and Gary, a builder, living on proceeds of a house he sold. "But we can't keep doing this," he notes. "Funds are running out."

The Grey Bears share the warehouse and office facilities of the Neighborhood Food Coop, 105 Harvey West Boulevard; the federally-funded Food and Nutrition program under the direction of Al DiLudovico, provides the telephones and typewriter, and desks come from the CAB. Right now the program is limited because trucks are needed.

"When a grower calls and says he has a field of lettuce he is going to plow under, we have to get a group of people out there immediately or we lose it," says Gary.

The young directors also visualize Grey Bears getting into cooperative food purchasing, non-profit housing and consumer information.

On the board of directors for the non-profit organization are Robert Swenson, Cabrillo College president; Marilyn Young, director of the American Cancer Society here; Ezetta Dawson of the Senior Legal Service, Mayor Sally DiGirolamo, SCOUT Director Frank Gallagher, Jackie Gibbs of the Neighborhood Food Co-op, John Grissom of Monterey Experience, Inc., Harry Kroll of the Senior Citizens Advisory Committee, Jerry Smith, Senior Citizens coordinator; RSVP Director Bety Waggoner, the Rev. Nick Bosworth of the Association of Churches, Hilda Whitehead of Grey Bears and Kristina and Gary.

This past week directors of Grey Bears appeared before the Board of Supervisors to ask for revenue-sharing funds to pay for rental of a warehouse, cold and frozen food storage, telephone and office supplies, two pickup trucks, and salaries for the two coordinating directors and two part-time secretaries. Total amount requested for one year is \$50,221.

The program has been endorsed by the League of Women Voters of Santa Cruz County whose president, Marnell Hillman, appeared before the supervisors.

Gary says of the program, "When people get to be in their 60s, society considers them no longer productive so they are side-lined. I think the Grey Bears have shown that there is no age limit to productivity. We have people 82 years old out picking lettuce, and they are eager to help themselves."

He says they are asking community residents to raise 10 percent more vegetables in their gardens than they need to help supplement the food for seniors. "We would be glad to pick up day-old bread, or any food that is edible and still nutritious."

Call 427-3171 and ask for Grey Bears.



Seniors participate in self-help Operation Brown Bag, project of California Grey Bears, Inc. They go out in the fields to pick surplus lettuce, above, and then package it and other vegetables and fruit for distribution to seven points in Santa Cruz County.



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the food bank. Over, receive Brown Bags each week containing fruit and vegetables. The average age is 73, 23 percent are disabled, and the Grey Bears themselves have contributed more than 4000 volunteer hours since February in their self-help operation.

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Gary Denny and Kristina Mailliard, founders of the Grey Bears, get ready to load bags of food for distribution to seniors. The two coordinators of the program presently are working strictly on a volunteer basis and putting in a full work week.

