

Second Harvest Food Bank celebrates 40 years

Food Banks
By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — From a small operation in Santa Cruz to a massive complex of warehouses on the outskirts Watsonville, Second Harvest Food Bank has been providing food to hungry people for four decades.

On Friday, the food bank celebrated its 40th anniversary at its giant Watsonville location, with hundreds of city and county officials, as well as officials and workers from dozens of non-profit organizations with which Second Harvest works.

Second Harvest began feeding hungry families in 1972, when founder Michael Alexander began soliciting donations from local grocery stores, farmers and the United States Department of Agriculture, and putting together boxes of food.

In the beginning, recipients would pick up their food from the back of a pickup truck, then at a

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network of 10 homes, and later at the organization's first location in Santa Cruz.

"My goal was for us to be so successful that we would go out of business," Alexander said Friday.

The food bank was launched in earnest when Alexander contacted agencies statewide to take their share of a donated 40 tons of cauliflower from a Watsonville farmer.

That sparked off efforts statewide to start food banks in Santa Clara, Alameda, Sacramento and Contra Costa counties.

Since then, Second Harvest has grown exponentially, and now works with several agencies

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Willy Elliott-McCrea, CEO of the Second Harvest Food Bank, welcomes a large crowd to the event Friday.

HARVEST

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countywide to provide healthy food to approximately 55,000 people per month. Volunteers every month receive and distribute more than 500,000 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables. It is the Second oldest food bank in the U.S.

Alexander disputed suggestions that he founded the food bank, opting instead to share credit with the legions of staff and volunteers who helped.

"It's absolutely incredible what's grown here from the seed we planted," he said. "It's very gratifying to see something we created last so long."

Chief executive officer Willy Elliot McCrea, who started as a driver in 1978 and was promoted to director 10 years later, called the anniversary "overwhelming."

"I'm going to see people I haven't seen in 30 years," he said. "I don't know how I'm going to get through today."

The food bank has added a giant warehouse and massive refrigerated storage spaces, but it has also added thousands of people who need help feeding their families as the economy continues to tank.

Now, with 60 percent more families seeking food assistance than five years ago, McCrea outlined the food bank's 10-year plan to continue to meet basic food needs, but also to build its network of the businesses and non-profit organizations with which it partners.

He also said the food bank wants to reduce by 10 percent the obesity level in Watsonville, which at 50 percent towers over that in Santa Cruz.

The philosophy behind the 10-year plan is simple. Well-fed children are better able to make good choices, and thus to get a better education. Those children then go on to get jobs, become consumers and boost the economy, said chief development and technology officer Danny Keith.

Moreover, partnering with such non-profit organizations as Janus of Santa Cruz, Dientes and Project Homeless Connect, Second Harvest can put efforts

to stopping the source of poverty.

"We have to work with one another in a way we've never done before," McCrea said. "How can we move families out of poverty? It's not enough anymore just to put food on the table. We want to continue to work with other non-profits that fill a need that we don't."

One of those organizations, Watsonville-based Salud Para La Gente serves as a distribution point for Second Harvest food packages.

"We salute Second Harvest," said community relations director Dan Sedenquist. "It's a great organization, and we're delighted to be partnered with them."

Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County program director Christine Cuevas said her organization helps the food bank by providing competitive grants.

"The fact that Second Harvest has been around for 40 years feeding people who need it is incredible," she said.

Janus of Santa Cruz Director of Consumer relations Maria Elena De La Garza said the food bank provides food for the organization's inpatient and outpatient drug and alcohol program.

"We are grateful for the food bank and how they help us support our clients," she said.

Capitola Mayor Mike Termini said McCrea has had "the same attitude and the same energy for years."

"He walks into his office like it's his first day on the job and makes this happen," Termini said.

Assemblyman Bill Monning, who spoke at the event, called Second Harvest Food Bank a "landmark."

"Their mission has grown from being a food provider to being an instrumental member of our community," he said.

Julia Calabenben, 80, said she has been volunteering at Second Harvest Food Bank for three decades, working with the organization's Food for Children program, helping with food drives and fielding calls from customers.

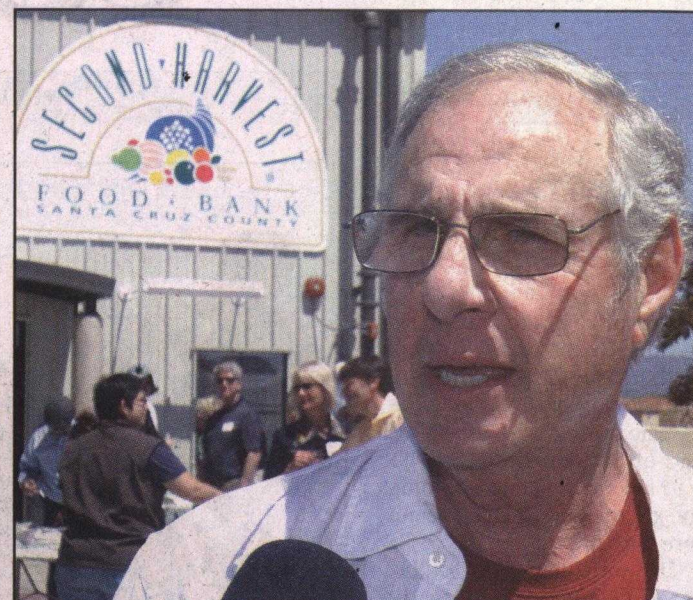
"I'm busy all the time and I like it," she said.

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Attendees enjoy a barbecue lunch at the anniversary celebration.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian



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Michael Alexander was one of the founders of the Second Harvest Food Bank 40 years ago.



LEFT: A barbecue lunch was served at the event. RIGHT: Danny Keith, chief development and technology officer at the Second Harvest Food Bank, shows a skateboard design made for the "Grind Out Hunger" program.

Photos by Tarmo Hannula
Register-Pajaronian

