

GROWING STRONG

Three small nonprofits that are making a big difference in the North Bay.

By Jane Hodges Young

Helen Keller once remarked that the world is moved "not only by the mighty shoves of the heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker." And while the North Bay is home to many large nonprofits with high profiles, there are many smaller, lesser-known organizations doing yeoman's work to make our communities better places to live. *NorthBay biz* has selected three small organizations—one each from Napa, Sonoma and Marin counties—that are making a difference, even though they're flying (for the most part) under the radar. Their stories follow.

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Cathryn Couch (left) works with Columbia Shafer, Natalia Chamaki, Carly Fernandez, Anthony Brant and Andrew Martin at the Ceres Community Project in Sebastopol. (Duncan Gerrist Photography)

The Ceres Community Project

Cathryn Couch has always been more inclined to say “yes” than “no” when the universe comes calling. And that’s a very good thing.

Couch is the founder and executive director of a fledgling Sebastopol nonprofit called The Ceres Community Project, which teaches teens how to cook and provides free, healthy, organic meals and nutritional education to nearly 150 Sonoma County families touched by cancer and other life-threatening illnesses.

After earning her MBA from the University of Michigan—followed by a stint as a marketing and strategic planning manager for a Southern California company—Couch moved to Marin and became director of communications for The Hunger Project U.S., a global organization that educates people about the causes of and solutions to hunger. She also honed her skills as a chef, and when she moved to Sonoma County in 1991, she started a vegetarian organic home delivery service (delivering her meals to about 80 families in Marin and Sonoma counties each week). After 10 years, she got out of the business and started working as a part-time chef.

“In 2006, at the beginning of the summer, a friend of mine called. She wanted to find a job for her daughter and she also wanted her to learn to cook, so she wanted me to hire her. I wasn’t in a position to hire anyone, but my friend was insistent and suggested we cook meals for the homeless shelter—and she volunteered to pay for the food,” Couch explains. “As soon as she made that suggestion, I thought about a friend who was involved with the local cancer support community, so I called her.” The friend confirmed there were families who needed help, so Couch agreed to teach the 17-year-old how to cook, and the two of them prepared meals for three local families once a week for about seven weeks.

After a few weeks, Couch says she “woke up with a vision of a nonprofit that would give kids needed experience in the kitchen,” while simultaneously providing help to families touched by serious illnesses. In March 2007, The Ceres Community Project, named for Ceres, the pre-Roman goddess of agriculture, was launched in the kitchen of the Community Church of Sebastopol. Its funding source was a \$5,000 line of credit from Andy’s Produce in Sebastopol and a \$7,500 grant from To Celebrate Life Breast Cancer Foundation in Marin.

Initially, there were five teens, and the group cooked for four families each week. By the end of 2007, 30 teens had been involved in preparing 4,500 meals for 28 families. Fast forward to the end of 2010: in three years, more than 69,000 meals had been served to more than 300 families and, “we’re literally overrun with kids who want to be in our kitchen,” Couch says.

The young chefs-in-training, from 25 different schools throughout the county, cook three afternoons a week. The program is so popular, Couch says, they have to schedule many of the teens to shifts every other week, because they don’t have enough room in the kitchen to accommodate all the volunteers.

That’s all about to change, however. The city of Sebastopol, upon learning more about the project, passed a resolution to lease—at no cost—city-owned space at 7351 Bodega Avenue on the Ives Park



parcel. “They’re also giving us two five-year options to renew with no rent,” Couch explains, “and will put \$45,000 into the remodel.” She notes it will be a win-win situation. The Ceres Community Project will get the expanded space it needs and the city “will end up with a much more beautiful, usable facility, which we’ll make available for the city and other nonprofits to use at no charge,” Couch says.

The Ceres Community Project expects to move into the facility by the middle of 2011. The group is working with Community Builders Group, a nonprofit started by John Rechin, one of the owners of Total Concepts in Santa Rosa. Community Builders Group works on building projects for nonprofit organizations

and individuals in need, using its construction community contacts to get contractors and suppliers to donate, on average, 50 percent of the goods and labor needed for each construction project it undertakes. Myers Restaurant Supply, through Bob Mathis, is providing kitchen design expertise and is working with the county health department on all permits and approvals at a very reduced rate.

As The Ceres Community Project expands, so does its outreach. In 2009, Ceres launched an educational program to complement its food delivery service.

“Many of our clients, after being with us six to eight months and eating

solely organic, whole grain foods with no refined sugars, find that they feel the difference the food is making. Then they get to a point, health-wise, where they don’t really need us anymore, but they don’t know how to cook in this manner,” Couch says. “So JoEllen DeNicola, our nutrition director, developed a 16-hour healing foods cooking course that we offer on a sliding scale donation basis. It’s designed for people recovering from illness. And we’ve also started a free community lecture series at the Center for Spiritual Learning in Santa Rosa.”

Despite the recession, which has dramatically impacted donations to nonprofits, The Ceres Community Project has been fortunate to see a steady stream of cash and in-kind giving. Couch counts on more than 1,000 donors with annual individual gifts between \$25 and \$50,000 per year. “They’re passionate and dedicated donors. We’ve managed to generate enthusiasm and excitement that pulls people in. But as we get bigger and more established, it will become harder. My goal is to get the organization to be sustainable for the long term without me, and I want to develop income streams that can grow with the organization,” Couch explains.

It’s also no fluke that the name of the organization includes the word “community.”

“The more the community is involved, the more they take ownership,” Couch says. “We have more than 30 in-kind donors [Oliver’s Market, for example, gives a 50 percent discount on all the meat and seafood that’s purchased]. For us, it’s about how many people we can get involved. We want them to feel they helped make it happen, because they did.”

CERES COMMUNITY PROJECT



Preparing food
is not just about
yourself and others.
It is about everything.

~ Shunryu Suzuki



Cathryn Couch instructs Xavier Herrera-Keehn at the Ceres Community Project. (Duncan Garrett Photography)

