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“Hidden in Plain Sight” and its Implications and Opportunities for Sonoma Valley

Earlier this month, the Sonoma Valley Fund released a report that came out of a study they commissioned to better understand the issues and challenges facing the Valley’s nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The report was discussed and presented to the community on May 25th with a second presentation to take place on June 1st at 7:00 PM at Vintage House.

The findings of the study are significant yet not surprising for those of us close to the pulse of the Valley's nonprofit sector. Two of the key takeaways from the study create a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, individual donors, and others to come together to envision and invest in creating a sustainable nonprofit sector to meet the growing and changing needs of our community.

Finding #1: There is a growing disconnect between the scale, interdependence, and complexity of the challenges facing the Valley on the one hand and the current capacities and capabilities of the sector on the other.

Opportunity: In order for the Valley’s nonprofit sector to be able to rise up to the challenges that lie ahead and to grow their capacity and capabilities, the local philanthropic community—individual donors, family foundations, corporate foundations, and Community Foundation Sonoma County—must be willing to lean in and step up to support capacity building.

As someone who has devoted her 30-year career to working with donors, funders, and organizations to build the capacities of nonprofits here in Sonoma, around the Bay Area, and beyond, I can assure you that a very limited amount of funding is currently available to invest in this critically needed area. Donors want organizations to be more professional, to have strong leadership, to be savvy in meeting growing community needs, yet what is also true is that donors and funders often direct their giving to specific programs, limiting how donations can be used. These days, few institutional funders and individual donors want their money going towards expenses like general operations or capacity building and this has been a major hindrance to the Valley’s nonprofit sector.

Nonprofit organizations are businesses just like for-profit companies, and as such, they need to continually invest in their capacity including marketing and messaging, strategic planning, and the professional development of staff if they are going to remain competitive in their marketplace and successfully fulfill their mission. And, just like in the business sector, in the nonprofit sector, people are the engines that drive effective organizations, however, it has become increasingly difficult for nonprofits to attract and retain strong candidates due to their inability to provide competitive wages—especially in a community like Sonoma Valley where the cost of living is getting out of reach for so

many. Somewhere along the line, an unspoken precedent was established that implies if you choose a career where you “do good for the world or your community” you have to sacrifice “doing well for yourself.” This has hurt the sector, with staff members that have climbed the ranks to become Executive Directors despite the fact that they have very limited leadership or business management skills, and on the flip side, the sector also loses qualified leaders that possess experience and post graduate degrees in nonprofit management because they cannot earn enough money to support themselves and their families and carve out their slice of the American dream. This problem needs to be talked about openly, and addressed.

Finding #2: There is an urgent need to challenge donors and nonprofits alike to seize new opportunities to work better and smarter, and to work together.

Opportunity: With the report of findings from the Sonoma Valley Fund a great challenge has been presented to us all.

As a strategic consultant who has worked to facilitate positive change in the nonprofit sector for three decades, there is potential before us, but will our community rise up, and what will it take?

- We need to break down barriers in our community—barriers between the have's and the have-not's, between the Latino and Anglo communities, and between donors and the staff members of nonprofit organizations. We must come together to craft a common vision and we must remain open to different viewpoints and to re-imagining a better and more effective way for the sector to flourish and to meet the growing demands of the community.
- We need a core group of funders and individual donors that have the capacity to give to make a financial commitment and to challenge their peers and the broader community of potential donors who may not as of yet jumped into the arena of philanthropy, to join them. If there is one thing Impact100 Sonoma has taught us it is that a small intention (100 Sonoma women giving \$1,000 each) can grow to be something much larger and have a far broader impact than was originally envisioned. Donor investments are needed for the purpose of hiring professionals to design and facilitate community dialogue, and to work with nonprofit organizations to help them develop their capacity, craft strategic plans, understand their market and craft persuasive messaging, explore collaborative partnerships with other stakeholders, and more.

It will take commitment and creative energy if we are going to heed the call of the Sonoma Valley Fund report. I moved to Sonoma nine years ago because I longed to live in a place with a strong sense of community—a place where people truly cared about each other and where there was a hub of nonprofit organizations. It has been a wake-up call to discover just how many organizations here exist hand to mouth each year, how little they have to invest in their own capacity building (most have no line item in their

budget for this), and how much they need and want the help that nonprofit professionals like myself can provide yet they simply can't pay for it.

I believe the time is now and that the desire is there on the side of the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors to come together for meaningful dialogue that will lead to a joint vision that will support us in moving in new directions to meet the current and shifting needs of the Valley.

In closing, it is my hope for Sonoma Valley, a community that I love, that community members and leaders from all sectors will heed the call and step up to the challenge by investing their time, professional skills, and the financial resources it will take to ensure our nonprofit sector has a strong future. I for one look forward to partnering with the Sonoma Valley Fund, with donors, with nonprofit organizations, and with other community stakeholders to advance this discussion and to develop a long-range plan that will excite donors, funders, and others to invest in not just the needs of today but a vision for tomorrow.

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