

# FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

by Ken Saxon

Ken Saxon's second act – following his business career – has been building a leadership network to empower, elevate, and connect Santa Barbara County's nonprofit leaders. He enjoys the opportunity to engage in civic life and leadership locally, especially through the nonprofit leadership organization he founded, Leading From Within.



## Grassroots Philanthropy Fills a Gap

How does a grassroots initiative go from start-up to raising more than \$5 million in just two years? This is the heartening local story of the 805 Undocufund. It's worth knowing about, because it is inspiring to anyone who cares about a cause and who wonders what's possible.

The 805 Undocufund began in the shadow of the Thomas Fire, among a group of nonprofit leaders who serve the large population of undocumented families in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Whether it's working in agriculture, providing household services, or working in the restaurants and hotels that enable our tourism industry, undocumented workers are the backbone of much of our region's economy.

As the Thomas Fire spread and then the debris flow cut our region in two, **Eder Gaona-Macedo** (Executive Director of nonprofit Future Leaders of America) worried. He realized that many of the parents of the Latino students his organization serves were losing the source of their incomes. And Eder guessed this situation was going to last many weeks. FEMA stepped in to provide emergency financial support, but not for the undocumented. How would they pay their rent? How would they feed their families?

Gaona-Macedo reached out to his colleagues at two other nonprofits – **CAUSE** (Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy) and **MICOP** (Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project) – and they started talking about what they could do. They had heard about an "UndocuFund" effort in Sonoma County – formed after the devastating

Santa Rosa wildfires – where money was raised to help support undocumented workers impacted by disasters. But trying to quickly launch such an effort here was daunting. How would they get the word out and get people to apply? Where would the money come from? Who would staff this effort?

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Despite all these uncertainties, the commitment of these nonprofits to serve these people in crisis drove them forward. The organizers started by creating an application process, and then training bilingual volunteers to sensitively interview applicants. (Many undocumented people are justifiably wary of institutions and strangers, given how vulnerable they are to deportation and being exploited.) And then they started getting the word out, via Spanish-language media and word-of-mouth.

The response was overwhelming. Within weeks, a few thousand people applied for disaster aid. The organiz-

ers realized they would need millions of dollars to support all these people. They set what felt like a giant stretch fundraising goal of \$1,000,000. And foundations and individuals came out of the woodwork to support this cause – raising \$1.8 million (close to double their original goal) and allowing them to serve 1,500 families in their Thomas Fire relief efforts.

Two years later, along comes COVID-19. Gaona-Macedo remembers, "Once we saw the Governor was limiting the gathering of people and how many people could be in restaurants, we knew folks would be losing income and jobs. We knew this crisis would be big, but we didn't know how big. But we already had a template, including a website and social media. It was a matter of fundraising and getting people to sign up."

But there were new challenges. Given the health risks in the pandemic, people couldn't apply in person. The organizers had to quickly figure out how to help applicants access technology so they could apply online, and then how to manage the data in a confidential and encrypted way. Once again, their passion and persistence overcame these hurdles.

When the 805 Undocufund reopened for applications a couple months ago, many undocumented families remembered them. By April 30 when application closed, the Fund had more than 7,000 applications for aid! There was no way to fund all of them a grant that would make a real difference, so the organizers focused their aid on people in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties who had completely lost their jobs (rather than those who just lost some of their hours).

Where do things stand as of now? For the COVID-19 crisis, the 805 Undocufund has already raised \$3 million, with a goal of double that. Every week, the fund is sending out several hundred checks averaging \$1,200 – the same stimulus amount most U.S. citizens received from the federal government. They are still raising money, and have more needy

people they are anxious to serve. If this cause interests you, you can learn more or donate at [www.805undocufund.org](http://www.805undocufund.org).

When you ask the organizers and funders why this philanthropic effort has been such an extraordinary success, the word you hear most is "trust." The three lead nonprofits had long relationships as partners and allies, and they trusted each other. The original foundation funders also had long and good relationships with these three nonprofits.

One other critical trust-based component that led to the fund's success was that each of the players involved had a high level of cultural competency. They had ample experience serving the local undocumented population, and had learned over time how to engender their trust. As a result, prospective applicants were willing to make themselves vulnerable to share their story and apply.

How does a fund like this impact our community? Some of the tangible benefits include sustaining our local workforce and reducing human suffering. Also, the aid beneficiaries will spend this money on basic needs – which will end up going to their landlords or local food markets. This all goes right back into the local economy.

And it's about more than money. **Claudia Armann**, a Steering Committee member of the 805 Undocufund, told me that "for undocumented residents, it can be all too easy to believe that you are not welcome here. But when they hear that more than 900 individuals have donated to this fund, they get a chance to feel cared about by their community."

A philanthropic effort like this doesn't solve everyone's problems. But it's a vehicle for generosity to flow from people who care to people in need, and it makes a tangible impact. Everyone involved benefits – the aid recipients, the donors, the community. And our world gets a bit more connected and more caring. And can't we use more of those things right now? •/f



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