



The Can-Do Community Shows Its Strength and Flexes Its Muscle

A can-do spirit is the essence of The Almanor Foundation founded in October 2020 after the rural area of Chester, CA recognized that “stuff happens” and they could not let their community flounder or be dependent on other entities. This became even more apparent when the Dixie fire that raged for an unheard of 60 days destroyed 1,000,000 acres in its path changing the lives of those who lived in the Greater Lake Almanor basin that is nestled at the base of Lassen Peak in Northern CA.

But this was not the first challenge that faced this rural community . . .

In 2019, Chester welcomed and assisted over 500 evacuees from the Paradise, CA fire that destroyed the town taking 85 lives. “Though we were unsure of how to handle the need, the community stepped up to support and show a generosity that defines our community. With no funding or plan in place, within 24-hours we were operational, though certainly by the seat of our pants. We opened an evacuation center for people with pets, and received donations to assist evacuees with lodging, food, gasoline, wood, blankets, clothing, baby items . . . anything that could bring some comfort,” says Vice-Chair of The Almanor Foundation Susan Bryner. “In the aftermath, we recognized how unprepared we were to take care of those in need, including ourselves in a crisis.”

COVID then arrives in 2020 once again presenting unforeseen circumstances to a remote area that struggles to remain viable in the winter months let alone having to shut-down by required state-wide mandates. “Hit right between the eyes, again, we began a program to shop for those most vulnerable and our Chamber of Commerce started a gift-card campaign to buy certificates from stores and restaurants to keep cash coming in while their doors were closed. We survived and overcame but ‘punting’ and hoping for the best was not a plan. Our isolated community was too vulnerable and we deserved better,” Bryner explains.

The plan started percolating . . .

Eight like-minded people created a steering committee with the idea of beginning a foundation that would house resources for times of crisis as well as overseeing initiatives that would spark the economy that had been merely maintaining but not thriving. Working diligently but with no urgency the foundation was named, a board of directors was selected, and applications were submitted for non-profit status. Projects were determined that would boost the economy, add to tourism and enhance everyone’s quality of life. All was moving forward in a timely fashion when once again, “stuff happened.”

On July 23 the county of 19,000+ residents was faced with the Dixie Fire that required evacuation for many for over 35 days, destroying two towns, knocking on the door of Chester, Taylorsville and Crescent Mills as well as other mountain communities and forever marring the beauty that is treasured by those who called the Lake Almanor basin home.

Within five days, the foundation launched the Wild-Fire Relief Fund knowing the need for monies to help those who were immediately displaced and for the long-term effort it would take to revitalize the basin. While evacuated and not knowing if they would have a home to return to, the board raised money, took calls from the desperate, volleyed international media, thankful that this time something was in place.

“We grew-up quickly and literally under fire,” says Bryner. “We raised money and dispersed money co-creating the Funder’s Roundtable with North Valley Community Foundation, which received national acknowledgement and now is a model for an efficient and effective way to leverage and distribute funds to help those in need.

Though the revitalization of the community is always on the forefront since it is a long-term journey that has just begun, the foundation remains committed to the initiatives that will lead to economic growth to their community. With three events on the calendar to raise money for foundation projects, keeping the Wildfire Relief Fund active and making all this activity visible to the community, the all-volunteer board has become quite adept at juggling more than a few balls in the air.

“We call ourselves the can-do community for a reason. With what we are facing after the devastation from the Dixie fire, we took it as an opportunity to rebuild, restore and revitalize our community bigger and better. The fundraising continues, the community involvement grows and the initiatives are moving forward,” Bryner says with the grit and determination that is seen and is part of the identity of this spunky, rural community.

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