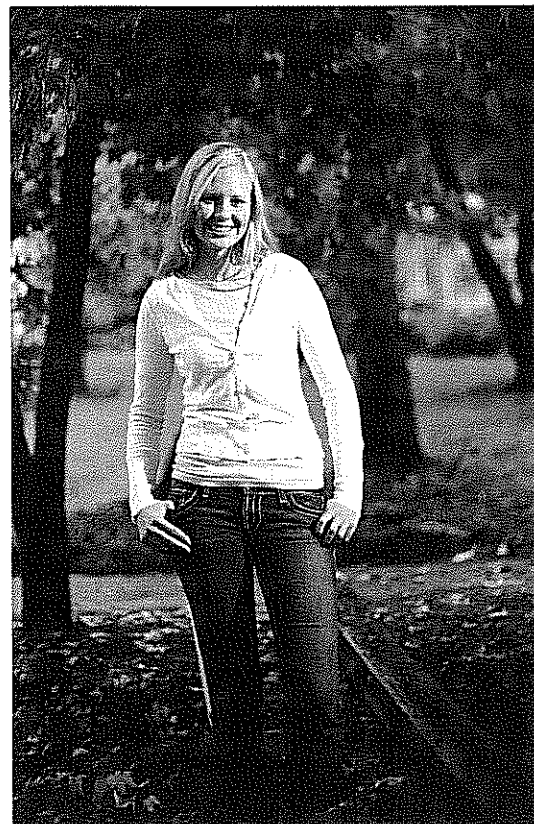


The power of two

Photos by CHARLIE GESSELL

Retired teacher Marilyn Shaver is an advocate for the women at The Living Room and also teaches English to those women needing help.



Ursuline High student Lindsey Hazelwood collected about 550 pounds of non-perishable foods and more than \$2,500 for the Rural Food Project at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa.

TOP PICKS

Volunteer Center of Sonoma County Volunteers of the Year Lindsey Hazelwood and Marilyn Shaver show that age is no obstacle to helping others

STORIES BY CHRIS SMITH

Retired teacher Marilyn Shaver admits she once drew assumptions about people who appear to be living on the streets, and she steered clear of them.

When friends at her church, First Presbyterian, suggested in the mid-1990s that she look into a new center for struggling women and children, she hesitated.

"My first response was, 'I don't know anything about this,'" she recalled.

But she did take a look into The Living Room. It's a center at downtown Santa Rosa's Episcopal Church of the Incarnation at which women having a hard time sheltering, feeding and clothing themselves and perhaps their children can find a meal and caring mentors eager to help them stabilize and advance their lives.

Marilyn spoke with some of the women 16 years ago and discovered they weren't all simply bearing the consequences of poor decisions. She met some lovable, good-humored people who'd been dealt hardships and were grateful for a kindness as simple as a cup of coffee and warm, safe place to drink it.

"I saw them with new eyes," Marilyn said. She recognized the courage and humanity in the women at The Living Room (thelivingroom-sc.org) and began volunteering to assist and advocate for them. She also teaches English as a Second Language to those women needing the help.

The women often surprise and delight her.

"They help each other," she said. "And whenever I go there, I always find someone to laugh with. It's not all dreary."

Now 84 and the recipient of the 2010 Volunteer of the Year Award from the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County, Marilyn blesses the day she found Santa Rosa's only daytime drop-in center for homeless women and children. She said the place helps her with a goal to challenge herself to take on endeavors that aren't routine and easy.

"I want to stay out of my comfort zone," she said. "When I'm out of my comfort zone I learn. I've learned so much from the women of The Living Room."

About a year ago, a high-school kid who's lived all her life in Santa Rosa set out to combat hunger in her hometown by collecting some food and money, and talking up the issue.

Lindsey Hazelwood soon discovered by coming face to face with people who struggle for enough to eat that the problem is far greater than she imagined. She resolved to do something more substantial and meaningful than what might be generally expected of an 18-year-old.

When her endeavor was finished, she'd collected for the Rural Food Project at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa about 550 pounds of non-perishable foods and an impressive amount of cash: more than \$2,500.

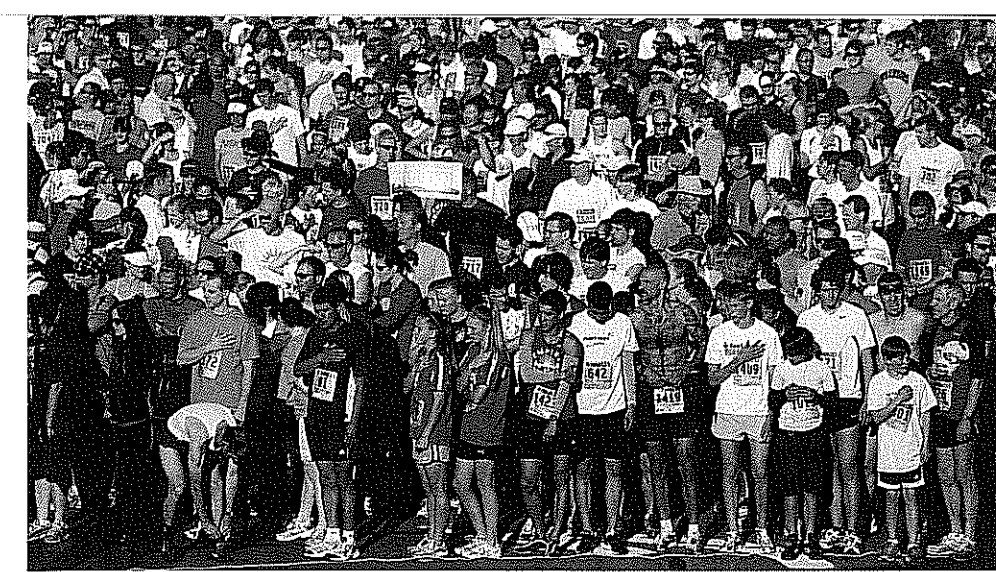
Most of the monetary donations came at an awareness-rich luncheon that Lindsey hosted to introduce people to the Rural Food Project and the nature of hunger in Sonoma and Lake counties.

"I really wanted people to know how to help," she said. It greatly encouraged her when many of the people she spoke to, at the luncheon at her school – Ursuline High – and in front of grocery stores, appreciated learning about the Rural Food Project (srcharities.org/services/rural-food-project.html) and were happy to contribute food or money.

The Volunteer Center of Sonoma County is so impressed by the depth and success of Lindsey's efforts to raise food, money and awareness that the agency named her its 2010 Youth Volunteer of the Year.

"I'm so humbled," said Lindsey, who's now studying nursing at Dominican University in San Rafael. "I never expected recognition for it."

She's aware of the need to help assure that people in the community aren't going hungry, something that will never leave her. The anti-hunger project "showed me that a person really can make a difference if you're passionate about it," Lindsey said.



KENT PORTER

Participants line up at the beginning of The Human Race.

Benefit events

HUMAN RACE KICK-OFF BREAKFAST: Feb. 1. The annual breakfast is a chance for businesses and charitable organizations to meet and unite in one of the largest collaborative fundraisers in Sonoma County: The Human Race. The popular event, which has as many as 10,000 walkers and runners, will be May 7, 7:30 a.m. Flamingo Hotel Resort and Spa, 2777 Fourth St. 573-3399; volunteernow.org.

LAWYERS WITH A HEART: Feb. 4. Legal Aid of Sonoma County hosts this special evening of cabaret-style entertainment provided by the local legal community. Lawyers and judges sing, dance and become burlesque comics and clowns, all for a good cause. Legal Aid of Sonoma County provides services to people who could not otherwise afford legal help. 6 p.m. Mary Agatha Furth Center, 8400 Old Redwood Highway, Windsor. 542-6664; legalaidsc.org.

CALL OF THE WILD CAT FANCIERS SHOW: Feb. 12-13. Familiarize yourself with all things feline at the annual Cat Fanciers Show. Exhibitors show off different pedigrees and breeds of cats ranging from the cuddly to the exotic. Plenty of vendors will be on hand so you can stock up on supplies or shop for gifts for feline-loving friends. Proceeds from the show go to local rescue groups. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday. \$3-\$5. Main Pavilion, Santa Rosa Fairgrounds, 1350 Bennett Valley Road. 538-1473; srcatshow.com.

PAWS FOR LOVE: Feb. 12. Silent and live auctions, gourmet food and award-winning wines are just the openers for this unique art auction and benefit. The main attraction is the artwork by shelter animals, with just a little help from their human friends, with proceeds going to local animal shelters and rescue groups. 6-10 p.m. \$30-\$40. Finley Community Center Auditorium, 2060 West College Ave. 433-2952; pawsforlove.info.

'A NIGHT IN ITALY': Feb. 26. Soroptimist International is a long-time supporter and inspiration for women all over the United States and the world. This annual Italian dinner, hosted by the local chapters, includes wine, raffles and auctions. The fundraising event is for local programs, grants and scholarships for women and girls. 6 p.m. \$30. Scottish Rite Center, 600 Acacia Lane. 545-6089; sasantarosa.org.

CHINESE NEW YEAR: Feb. 26. 2011 brings us the year of the rabbit, which according to ancient traditional lore is one of the luckiest signs – a good omen for the upcoming year. The Redwood Empire Chinese Association hosts the festivities with food, music, the exciting dragon dance, acrobatics and lots of other entertainment. Proceeds benefit RECA's programs for the local Chinese community. 6 p.m. \$10-\$25. Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building, 1351 Maple Ave. 576-0533; recacenter.org.

HAVE A HEART BENEFIT AND GALA: Feb. 28. Dinner, music and dancing make for a regal and romantic evening at the Volunteer Center's annual gala and benefit. Live and silent auctions at the black-tie event will raise funds for Center, which promotes volunteerism and strengthens community service in Sonoma County. 6 p.m. Santa Rosa Golf and Country Club, 333 Country Club Drive. 573-3399; volunteernow.org.

SYMPHONY OF FOOD AND WINE: March 27. At this benefit, music-lovers are treated to gourmet foods and wines, fabulous raffle and auction items, and of course, music provided by the Santa Rosa Symphony Youth Ensemble. Fabulous raffle and auction items round out the program, with proceeds going to support the youth ensemble and other music programs for children. 4 p.m. Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, 50 Mark West Springs Road. \$35-\$40. 546-8742; santarosasympphony.com.