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7 LOCAL CHANGEMAKERS

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# Sacramento

MAGAZINE

## CHEAP EATS

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Sacramento  
MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2017

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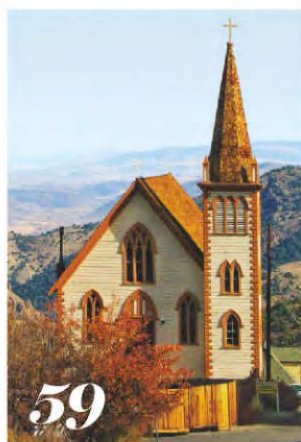
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# POWERED *by* WOMEN

MEET SEVEN EXCEPTIONAL SACRAMENTANS

*By Anna Quinlan / Photography by Jason Sinn*

These women are coming on strong. They range from politician and community activist to marketing professional, business owner and even a judge. All have the skills and motivation to perform high-level jobs, and in doing so, they show the way for a brighter, livelier and kinder Sacramento.



## Tracie Stafford

Tracie Stafford didn't *want* to run for political office. She had been nudged to do so several times, in fact, and had quickly dismissed the suggestion. "I felt like politics was just too dark," she remembers. "I wanted to make an impact from outside." That changed in 2016, however, when she volunteered at a restraining order workshop and Rev. Faith Whitmore, CEO of the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center, heard her story.

"She hammered me for 30 minutes," Stafford recounts of Whitmore's attempt to persuade her into running for office. "I kept telling her 'no,' but when I woke up the next day I knew I had to do it."

Stafford is vice president of Ovation PR & Advertising. To get to her position, she took a route through the economic hills and valleys of the modern day job market. Her career began in data entry in the Silicon Valley, where she climbed the ranks until she was a senior manager. In 2001, while pregnant with her fourth child, she and her husband decided to move to Elk Grove in search of a lower cost of living and better access to good public schools. Visibly pregnant and encountering the effects of the dot-com bust, however, she struggled to find a job. "I basically had to make a job for myself," she says. "I never really wanted to be an entrepreneur, but I was overqualified for what was available." She founded Exceptional Events, a public relations and event management firm, and found herself "empowered as a small business leader."

She flourished so much as a business owner that she was elected president of the National Association of Women Business Owners, chairman of the Sacramento Small Business Board and communications chair of the California Small Business Board, among other roles.

When the economy took another big downturn in 2009, however, Stafford lost her family's Elk Grove home as well as her business. A third-generation domestic violence survivor, she used her free time to pursue advocacy work on behalf of other women. She found a platform by competing in Mrs. pageants, which allowed her travel the world and speak with women and girls from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

She was appointed to the board of the Sacramento Domestic Violence Prevention Collaboration and asked to be a spokesperson for the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence. Members of the local political community began to take note,

and in 2016 she was elected as an assembly district delegate as well as the president of the Women Democrats of Sacramento County.

Which brings us back to that conversation with Whitmore, which ultimately led to Stafford's bid for mayor of Elk Grove in 2016. "At the time, the Elk Grove City Council was comprised only of Caucasian and Asian men," she remembers. "Not one woman, not one African American. You're losing the input of at least 50 percent of the population in that situation." She adds, "I've lived through poverty, I've lost my job, I've lost my house. People in Elk Grove get that, but the folks in office didn't get that. How can you legislate for me if you can't see through my lens?"

With no real political background, no budget, and few endorsements, Stafford surprised pundits by receiving 8,000 votes and coming in third out of seven candidates. "2016 was really just the launch of my 2018 campaign," she says with a laugh. "I plan to triple that this time around."







## Judge Judy Holzer Hersher

When Judge Judy Holzer Hersher had her second child while attending the UC Davis School of Law in the early 1980s, she and her husband, Michael—a young attorney himself—couldn't really afford traditional child care options. Undeterred, Hersher rallied several other students who together founded Perfect Tender Childcare Co-op, an on-campus day care for law students that's still running today.

This is a trend on Hersher's résumé: If she finds a resource to be lacking, she creates that resource herself. In 1993, following the firebombing of Temple B'nai Israel, where she was serving as president, she founded the Sacramento Area Hate Crimes Task Force. "If you raise voices together, you can't be ignored," she says of what motivated her to recruit leaders from various religious and cultural groups. "If you can experience other backgrounds that might not be similar to your own, you build better bonds and then the community as a whole is strengthened."

At the core of Hersher's professional accomplishments is this desire to strengthen the community. From founding the Leonard M. Friedman Bar Association—which brings Jewish members of the legal community together—to creating an arts and music award for public school students in the Operation Protect and Defend program, to founding the King Hall Alumni on the Bench mentorship program, Hersher seems to be constantly asking herself, "How can I improve things for those around me?"

Indeed, she says, "I was taught and firmly believe that the world is not a perfect place, but I have a responsibility to make it a little better while I'm here." She explains that all of the initiatives she's devoted herself to over the years "were designed to promote or give back to whatever community was benefiting, which in turn really benefits the broader community as a whole." The Sacramento County Bar Association recognized Hersher with its Humanitarian of the Year award in 2000.

Currently serving as a judge for the Superior Court of Sacramento County, an appointment she accepted from Gov. Gray Davis in 2000, Hersher believes she has "the greatest job in the world," a claim that goes back to her deep-seated desire to improve the community. "I get to implement what I believe in every day," says this recipient of SCBA's Judge of the Year award in 2012.

She notes that since she's been a judge, "It's become poignantly obvious to me that the role of family in raising up mentally healthy, successful, community-minded and law-abiding citizens is critical. When that breaks down, I see the ramifications in every case I've handled. Family is really the foundation of civilization or the lack of it."

Her own family consists of husband Michael and their three adult children, Jessie, Ari and Sofi, whose closeness she counts as her greatest accomplishment of all. "That was really one of my top goals in life, that we'd stick together and feel good about being together."





## Tamika L'Ecluse

Tamika L'Ecluse moved out of her family's North Highlands home at age 17, rented a studio apartment downtown and set out to "discover the world." Although she never made it out of Sacramento, she did discover a world of possibility.

L'Ecluse is currently focusing on staff development and teaching Positive Discipline parenting classes at the California Montessori Project while running her campaign for Sacramento City Council. She has two decades of local activism under her belt, all going back to those early days of discovering downtown Sacramento and the people who called it home.

"I became friends with some LGBTQ activists here and I was motivated to get involved because some of the experiences my friends were having in the community were really violent and scary and awful," she says. "I wondered, 'How can this be happening?' I was going to visit friends in the hospital who were attacked because of how people perceived them and the way they're living their life. I wanted to change that trajectory," she says of her first experience as an ally and an activist.

L'Ecluse continued to volunteer with local charities while working as a bartender and attending early childhood education classes at Sacramento City College, becoming a teacher at McKinley Montessori in 2003. "It was one of the best experiences," she says of her years as a teacher. "I grew so much there."

While her activism work largely took a back seat in her early years as a teacher—a time when she and her husband also had two children of their own—L'Ecluse began attending Oak Park Neighborhood Association meetings in 2008 and volunteering for "little things like park clean ups." Through her involvement

with OPNA—to which she was eventually elected president—she learned about "some of the challenges of the neighborhood and what people cared about, and that activist spirit from my late teens and 20s was reignited."

In 2016, after 13 years as a teacher, L'Ecluse felt it was time for her to move on. "I wanted to have more of an impact for kids in my neighborhood. The kids at McKinley [Montessori] have much different challenges and different privileges than the kids in Oak Park, and it kind of bothered me that each day I'd go to a place where these kids are going to be totally OK—most of them have two parents who are working, they have a really good chance of going to college and being successful and getting a job—and then I'd go home every day to a neighborhood where kids don't have those securities and that foundation. I wanted to bring all those things I learned through Montessori to my neighborhood to help these kids." That's why she served recently as a program manager for the Greater Sacramento Urban League.

With L'Ecluse's résumé showing an almost single-minded focus on community improvement spanning 20 years, yet representing an impressively broad range of vehicles for affecting positive change, she has essentially been preparing to get involved in local government for years, whether or not she realized it at the outset. In 2014 she ran for the City Charter Commission, and she recently filed to run for District 5 City Councilmember in the 2018 election.

"I think that we've had some great leaders on City Council, but I think sometimes the voices of the community get stifled or go silent because of how politicians affect the community without their input or involvement," she says of why she's running. "I want to bring City Council back as a community seat, working for the residents."





## Nicole Rogers

When Nicole Rogers, director of marketing and communications for Nugget Markets, moved to Sacramento with her husband in 2006 to escape the Bay Area and be closer to family, the city didn't seem rife with professional opportunities for the foodie with a marketing background. "I remember thinking to myself, 'If this is a government town and I'm a food girl, what am I going to do?'" she recalls with a laugh. "I didn't know better at the time to realize I had to be scrappy; I just was."

She made a bunch of cold calls and landed a job with a public relations agency, eventually working her way to an in-house marketing position with Chipotle Mexican Grill. "In 2013, Chipotle, through my partnership, was one of the founding sponsors of the first Farm-to-Fork Festival," Rogers recounts of one of the highlights of her time at Chipotle. "I went to all these meetings with nonprofits and educators and stakeholders and people in the region who were changing the food scene here, and it was awesome."

Rogers' front row seat to the genesis of Sacramento's Farm-to-Fork identity gave her a deeper appreciation for the region's unique intersection of agriculture and community. "Making Sacramento America's Farm-to-Fork Capital was about the bounty we have in this region as food producers and growers and manufacturers and what we have to offer," she says.

In 2014, Rogers accepted a position as the Farm-to-Fork program director, which she describes as "pretty uncharted territory." She adds, "It wasn't a city or state job, but it was highly political. There was a lot of emotion and opinion and energy about food and what people think is right or wrong about food."

One of the cold calls Rogers made upon her arrival to Sacramento back in 2006 was to Kate Stille, V.P. of Marketing and Communications at Nugget Markets. Although Stille didn't have a position to offer Rogers back then, the two continued to run into each other through their mutual involvement with the Metro Chamber and Farm-to-Fork events. "You never know where a cold call can take you," Rogers reflects on that conversation that ultimately led to her current position at Nugget Markets, which she assumed in late 2016.

She remains involved with charitable organizations in town. "Serving as the board chair of the Food Literacy Center, I get to work with elementary-aged kids to inspire them to want to eat their vegetables, and on the other end of the spectrum, as vice chair of the Center for Land Based Learning, I get to work with and inspire young people and beginning farmers who want to cultivate the land and work in environmental sciences."

For someone who came to Sacramento unsure if she'd be able to find a career in food, Rogers seems to have blazed a pretty perfect path for herself. "People like to make food really hard, but I want to take the difficulty out of food—to just celebrate it and eat it and enjoy it."





## Anne Marie Kramer

If you've been to a Vinyasa yoga class in Sacramento, there's a good chance that experience was influenced by Anne Marie Kramer, even if you've never heard of her. For Kramer, the owner of Zuda Yoga, teaching yoga is "not a choice, it's a calling."

When she moved to Sacramento in 2005, she was married to a primary care doctor, working as a pharmaceutical sales representative promoting antidepressants, and intending to move to LA as soon as possible. She'd been teaching yoga on the side for nearly 10 years, though, and was surprised to find that yoga hadn't yet caught on in Sacramento. "The plan wasn't to stay in Sacramento, but when I got here there was no yoga here at all; the market was wide open. So I decide to stay here."

Within her first week here, Kramer worked out an arrangement with an art studio in midtown where she could teach yoga and begin to build up a clientele, and she promptly started looking for a space to call her own. In June 2010, she and her now ex-husband opened the doors of the current location, on 19th Street. Within six months, Zuda was doing so well that her ex-husband quit his job as a physician to help run the yoga studio full time.

"We broke even the first month we were open and we made money in the second month," she remembers. "It's harder now than it was in the beginning because the market is so saturated. For the first five years there was no yoga in town. If you wanted to do power Vinyasa yoga you had to go to Zuda."

As Zuda's popularity grew and Kramer began leading workshops to certify and train new teachers, that changed. "When I

got here there was one Vinyasa teacher in the city, Rachel Miller. Since then, I've trained over 500 teachers," she recalls. "The hardest thing was that I was training people to become my competition." If you look at a list of all of the yoga studios in town, nearly every one of them has been opened by someone who was trained by or worked under Kramer at some point.

When asked if she resents this, she is as gracious as you'd expect a yogi to be. "The yoga mindset is about abundance," she says, "If we support each other, we can all do well."

And Zuda Yoga has certainly done well. During the studio's recent weeklong 10-year anniversary celebration, in a move that clearly demonstrates that abundance mindset, Kramer invited many of those former-students-turned-current-competitors back to Zuda to guest instruct special classes. Since it opened in 2007, Zuda has doubled in size—from 2,000 to 4,000 square feet—and is currently undergoing a major renovation that will further modernize the space and add more amenities to accommodate the 250 students who come through the doors every single day.

Kramer credits the success to continually evaluating the business, as well as herself personally, and asking where things need to evolve. "Our job is to translate the spiritual practice of yoga so people can understand it in their everyday life. What does it mean to follow the yoga path and how can I do that in my life right now?" One constant, however, is her conviction that while teaching yoga is, in fact, her calling, it's about much more than a physical practice. "For me it's always been about creating community, bringing people together and personal growth."



## **Bobbin Mulvaney**

Her name is synonymous with Sacramento's Farm-to-Fork movement—she and husband Patrick own and operate Mulvaney's B&L—but it's the business side of the restaurant that Bobbin devotes her time to these days.

"We've lost the spirit of entrepreneurship in our culture," she says. "I was raised being an entrepreneur. For me, it's ingrained; it's what I am." She was raised on a ranch in the Central Valley. Mulvaney's stepfather owned a gas station, restaurant, banquet hall, country-western bar, liquor store and 120 acres on which the family grew cotton. "My grandma set up a play market for me in the backyard under the grapevine," she recalls, "or she would make me a little pet store to pretend to run. As a child, every bit of play had to do with entrepreneurship. When I look back, I was just destined to sell a sandwich."

She's done more than sell a few sandwiches. She came to Sacramento in 1980, initially working for caterer Joan Leineke and eventually opening her own lunch delivery service. By the time Mulvaney's B&L opened in 2006, she had worked in a variety of kitchens for a variety of personalities. "When I got out of the kitchen and started doing sales, my job became to sell the dream. Part of selling that dream is selling the chef, and I noticed nobody was lifting women up, including in the media. There have been newspaper articles that mention my dog's name three times in the article and then say, 'Sometimes you'll see Patrick riding bikes with his wife,' and I just think, 'Really?'"

Not one for complaining or inaction, Mulvaney became passionate about mentoring female chefs. She serves on the board of the scholarship fund for the Sacramento chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier International, a philanthropic organization of women leaders in the culinary space; as well as the James Beard Foundation's Women in Culinary Leadership Program; Saint John's Plates Foundation, where she is a business mentor; and The Salvation Army, where she is chair of the culinary arts program and proudly boasts that four of the seven students in the inaugural class were women. In September, she hosted the first Women in Food & Ag Dinner, celebrating the women in Sacramento's culinary scene.

When she struggles to recall her exact title on some of these charitable boards, she mentions offhandedly that she's "had

three cancers and chemotherapy," mentioning that her memory isn't as sharp as it once was. She moves on quickly, though. She has more to say about the need to champion female chefs than she does about surviving cancer three times. "I live chronically resilient," she says with a laugh.

Mulvaney points out that Sacramento is uniquely positioned to stand out as a city that understands the value of food as a means of connection, noting the rise of Farm-to-Fork community dinners from Woodland's Main Street to the Tower Bridge. "The fact that our Tower Bridge connects straight from concrete into our agricultural area is so unique and so special," she says.







## Bernadette Austin

She has a background in health care, an expertise in public finance and a passion for achieving community improvement through funding strategies, but the metaphor that best illustrates Bernadette Austin's current role comes from a children's fable.

"I call it making the 'stone soup,'" she says of one of her chief duties as associate director for the UC Davis Center for Regional Change. "We come together with different partners. The local government's got *these* types of resources, and the university has *these* resources and that foundation might have *these* resources and a neighborhood group has *other* resources, and we put all of our resources together—someone brings potatoes and someone brings carrots and someone brings broth—and now we have soup. Now we have a meal."

The "meal" that Austin is serving is affordable housing for the Sacramento region, but her motivation and the means by which she's executing her vision bring a unique perspective to an often hot-button topic. "So much of my passion for this housing work is informed by my own personal experience," she says. "I experienced a significant amount of housing instability as a child. I lived with various relatives, slept on a lot of couches and floors; I've slept in cars, I've lived in hotels. I understand that people who are struggling with housing usually have a lot of factors at play. In my case, as a child, those factors were outside my control."

She initially went to college with hopes of becoming a cardiologist, but as she gained experience in health care she grew frustrated with typical treatment protocols. "We would 'treat people' (she's miming air quotes here)—they'd have heart disease or issues resulting from obesity or diabetes; or on the mental

health side they'd be struggling with substance abuse, depression, anxiety—we'd treat them and send them right back into the communities that were creating these problems."

It was this background that led Austin to take a closer look at affordable housing solutions. "How are our communities built?" she wondered. "Are there sidewalks, do people have opportunities to live in safe, affordable housing, do they have jobs that are rewarding, can they volunteer in their community?"

She ditched the cardiologist plan in favor of an undergraduate degree in public health and a master's degree in community development, then worked as a housing finance analyst at Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency and as a project manager at Domus Development before joining the Center for Regional Change.

"The thing I loved the most was working on really novel funding opportunities," she says, citing La Valentina Apartments on 12th and D streets in a high-crime area of the Alkali Flat neighborhood. "We funded that in part with recovery dollars under the Obama administration in 2008, and we partnered with both Regional Transit and SMUD. Plus it was a near net-zero energy building."

At the time this story is being written, Austin is awaiting word on the approval of a \$30 million grant to fund the Oak Park Promise Neighborhood, a 15-year initiative enacted by 40 community partners to improve Oak Park.

"I'm passionate about investing in community and social change," she says. "Often, people have really great ideas and a tremendous amount of passion, but that's just not enough. It's not enough to have a champion or to have people coming together; you have to have the resources. What I've gotten really passionate about recently is finding new ways to do this. We have to be more creative." ■



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