



Single mom struggles, but finds help

LOCAL FOOD BANK'S HELP IS VITAL, BUT HARD TO SWALLOW

by *Martin Sanchez*

“**M**arie” is worried. She has a diploma from Los Altos High School and a bachelor’s degree in business administration — but no job.

She owns a home in Mountain View and does charity work for her church — but she relies on a local food bank to feed herself



RECESSION TALES

This story is part of a series exploring ways the recession has affected Mountain View and its residents

and her developmentally disabled daughter.

Every day, she looks for work, cares for her daughter, and runs errands for her ailing parents — and she is struggling to stay afloat, she said.

Marie lost her job as an office manager in 2008 when the company moved overseas. She asked to remain anonymous for this story in order to protect her fam-

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ily's identity. It was hard for her to come to the Community Services Agency, the Mountain View nonprofit group that runs the food bank she visits, she said.

"I used to come with my sunglasses and a hat, because the people handing out food went to my church. I'm used to being the one handing out food at church," she said.

Marie said her savings have nearly run out. She has been receiving unemployment benefits for the past two years, but those checks will stop coming in two months, she said.

Food banks like CSA allow her to feed her family without borrowing money.

"There are so many people who go to bed at night with that debt hanging over their heads. I think that the miracle of my family is that we've not gone into debt," she said.

Marie said she has spent the past two years looking for jobs through former colleagues, and doing volunteer work for nonprofit groups in the hopes of being promoted to a paying position.

Neither approach has worked, she said.

She has significant personal responsibilities as well. As an only child, she runs errands, cooks and provides transportation for her parents, who are unable to care for themselves.

She also cares for her 16-year-old daughter, who has struggled with developmental disabilities since a childhood problem restricted oxygen flow to her growing brain, Marie said. She tries to teach her daughter skills that will help her find a job when she graduates from high school but worries about what her daughter's future holds.

Marie's daughter helps walk the family dogs, cook — "We love the Food Channel," — and care

for Marie's parents. In spite of the challenges her daughter faces, Marie said she is grateful for the time they spend together.

"My daughter is healthy. I'm a lucky mom," she said.

Her two older children — a son and another daughter — have already left home. Marie's ex-husband does not contribute to the family's finances, so her children have had to find ways of paying for their own college educations, she said.

Marie struggled to find career advice and financial support when she was laid off, she said.

"When you have been so self-sufficient for years, it can be hard to reach out for help," she said.

Marie said she has spent a lot of time researching support groups like the Community Services Agency, but has had some serendipitous moments as well. By chance, she discovered NOVA, a local career development agency through which she has been taking career development and computer skills classes for the past year.

"I don't want to sound religious, but I just heard 'Go to Foothill College and just show up.' I knock on this door, and this woman says 'Can I help you with anything?' I started to cry and I told her my story. She said 'You walked into the right place!' I walked into NOVA!" she said.

She finished one of NOVA's career certification courses last week, she said. She hopes that certificate will help her find work as an office manager again.

"In spite of all the obstacles, there is always something to work towards," she said.

Churches and nonprofits like NOVA and the Community Services Agency can provide huge benefits to everybody who finds themselves in financial trouble, she said.

"When I finally got rid of my pride, I realized how many resources are out there to help — emotionally, financially, spiritually," Marie said. ■