

## ***THE SAGES AMONG US: HARNESSING THE POWER OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT***

A Book Review by Cristine Kelly\*

While numerous books have been written about community development, and countless more on the concept of leadership, it was a delight to read the new book from local authors Gary Quehl and William Berquist entitled *The Sages Among Us: Harnessing the Power of Civic Engagement*. Using the communities of Grass Valley and Nevada City as a back drop, it weaves together an impressive and rich narrative of history, interviews and reflection on the role of leadership in advancing the well-being of community. What is striking about this book is not its revelations into leadership, but rather its premise that the rise of a generous leadership style, one that is centered on doing good rather than just doing well, has extraordinary capacity to shape the communities in which we live.

The authors coin the term sage leadership to describe this phenomenon. Sage leaders are defined as “unusually talented men and women who voluntarily share their experience and wisdom to advance the well-being of their community”. One hundred Nevada County residents were nominated for and participated in the project, including 50 senior leaders (ages 56-90) and 50 emerging leaders (age 25-55). The book makes clear that these are not the only sage leaders in Western Nevada County, but they are highly representative of those who are actively involved in advancing our community’s well-being. Each of the 100 sage leaders was interviewed in-depth on key questions about their life history, motivations for civic engagement and the benefits received from it, views about their own leadership and that of others, and their thoughts about the role that wisdom plays in community affairs. The resulting study is a remarkable insight into what compels people to serve their communities and invites others with sage leadership qualities to join in common cause.

The book moves through three well-defined sections and utilize quotes from the interview process throughout to strengthen and build upon its hypotheses. Beginning with histories and peak life experiences that have shaped who and what these leaders are today, the narrative turns to the dynamics of civil engagement and resolves in the reflection on leadership itself, and growth in spirituality and wisdom. The candor of the participants is refreshing, and sometimes

even startlingly vulnerable. Failure is seen not as the end, but rather the beginning. Learning, contemplation, and wisdom are born of compassion not only of ones fellow human beings, but for oneself.

Throughout the book, the authors build upon the idea that sage leadership is an intergenerational phenomenon, and then take that concept one intriguing step further. *“Sage leadership has to do with the reciprocal relationship of the old and the young. Each brings something of immense value to the other that is needed to advance the civic well-being of our communities.”* It is this concept of intergenerational bestowal that brings the book to its simple and elegant conclusion. If we are to tackle the dynamic challenges that modern day communities face, we must tap into the wealth of knowledge that exists between generations. Earnest in its message, *The Sages Among Us* celebrates the potential in each of us to become an agent of change, and presents us all with a call to action that we walk away from the book eager to answer.

*The Sages Among Us* will be available for purchase April 2 at The Center for Nonprofit Leadership ([www.cnlsierra.org](http://www.cnlsierra.org), 265-5600), The Book Seller (107 Mill St., Grass Valley), Sierra Mountain Coffee Roasters/Tomes (671 Maltman Dr., Grass Valley), and Harmony Books (231 Broad St., Nevada City). All net proceeds will go to support programs and services that the Center for Nonprofit Leadership (CNL) provides on behalf of local nonprofit organizations. *There will be a book signing with Gary Quehl on March 31 at Sierra Mountain Coffee Roasters/Tomes at 2:00.*

*\*Cristine Kelly was one of the project interviewers and is Executive Director of Music in the Mountains.*