

# Dentist, former Dixon mayor, picks philanthropy for retirement project

By Andrea E. Garcia

For 72-year-old Don Erickson, a Dixon resident of 45 years, the idea of having a story written about his life causes him to chuckle.

“Well, I don’t know what to say, what I can offer,” Erickson said humbly, not realizing his career in Dixon and practice in philanthropy impacted myriad people in Solano County. “But I’ll try.”

The white-haired man who can usually pull a story from his hip pocket at a moment’s notice seemed at a loss for words. But only for a moment, as talk of his upbringing in Montana began to revive the memories.

It was the late ‘30s when Erickson was born on a dirt farm in Montana. He recalls with some laughter Pleasant Ridge School, a one-room country grade school with one teacher, no electricity, and outside toilets. By the end of grade school, he recalled matter-of-factly, the class consisted of six students.

At Power High School, his class grew to 13. “It was a good thing. You can be editor of the paper, captain of the football team, and score seven touchdowns in one game,” he said.

At the University of Montana, Erickson decided to become a pharmacist. Well, that is, until he needed some dental work.

“My dentist was our basketball referee, a big coal miner who went to college because he was 6’4”,” he recalled. “He told me to change my major to dentistry and wouldn’t fix my teeth until I did. Well, that’s when I changed it. I needed my teeth fixed.”

Erickson, now with a career in mind, put himself through school at Northwestern in Chicago. By 1964, married and after serving two years at Travis Air Force Base with the rank of Captain, he opened up his own dental practice in Dixon, a place surrounded by acres of agriculture and friendly faces. He remained at the same location for 26 years, watching the city grow.

When Erickson announced he would run for Mayor of Dixon in 1993, his friends were elated, especially since they insisted he come out of retirement and help improve the community. And in 1994, he became mayor.

To say that Erickson spearheaded several projects is legitimate, said PJ Davis, former executive director of Dixon Family Services, including the building where DFS resides.



The building, located strategically in central Dixon, was decrepit at the time, with mold problems that looked like something out of a Stephen King movie, Erickson recalled. True, Davis said, the services provided by DFS – a one-stop shop of social services for families – were easily accessible to all and much needed in the community. But the building was old and the cost of repair was prohibitive.

“When he said the city had plans to demolish it, he started to look everywhere and did a good job, but it just didn’t make sense. This was a place that had easy access, lots of parking and was centrally located. He was instrumental, no doubt,” Davis said.

Erickson began to attend meetings, rub elbows with grant makers and sign letters of support to restore the old building. Ultimately, the one-story building received its share of grants, with a significant award from the California Endowment.

“It had to be saved,” Erickson said. “It serves so many people.”

The former Mayor made other changes in Dixon for the good of the community while serving his term – he helped build a new fire station and went from deficit city budgets to positive ones. “We were very fortunate in recruiting businesses that helped us financially.”

Continuing to make a difference, Erickson is now on the board of Solano Community Foundation, a nonprofit whose mission is to strengthen the community now and for future generations. It made sense to join, he said, and to keep Solano money in the county.

“It’s very important for the community. This is an area that doesn’t have a long tradition of philanthropy and it was important to get one started, to let the people know about philanthropy,” he said.

Philanthropy, he added, allows people to do things they couldn’t imagine, and helps people to fulfill their dreams. “At the Foundation, it gets done and will continue to get done,” Erickson said.

Giving by the country’s community foundations totaled \$4.6 billion in 2008, an estimated 6.7 percent increase in community foundation giving between 2007 and 2008, based on a report by the Foundation Center.

But, the Foundation Center added, findings from the annual “Foundation Giving Forecast Survey” also suggests that 2009 foundation giving will decrease in the range of the high single digits to the low double digits.

To help the community in trying times and low donations, SCF has implemented a new program – a program in which Erickson is also a member and supporter. It’s called the Nonprofit Partnership Program, or NPP, and is designed to strengthen, develop and serve Solano County nonprofits by improving capacity-building and enhancing visibility.

The program will conduct community forums in each city and promote partnerships among community leaders and decision makers, donors, the business sector and local nonprofits. Competitive grants will be available to NPP members, based on contributions to the program and results of community forums.

“All members are part of the same group, all doing good things in the community,” Erickson said of the program.

When asked if he feels he made a difference, Erickson doesn’t hesitate for a moment. “Oh, yeah. When you drive around and see parks, skate parks, and things that happened while you were a mayor, you feel good about it. You do,” he said.

For more information on NPP, or to become a member, contact Solano Community Foundation at 707-399-3846 or visit their site at [www.solanocf.org](http://www.solanocf.org).

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