

Former Jesuit Volunteer heads state volunteer office

By Rick DeVecchio

Raising eight children would be a full-time job, and then some, for many parents. But Karen Baker's parents did not see it that way. They felt active citizenship was crucial no matter how busy they were at home, and they pointed Karen and her siblings on a life-changing path of community service.

Baker's journey reached an historic milestone in February when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed her Secretary of Service and Volunteering, the nation's first cabinet-level post devoted to volunteering. The 46-year-old Sacramento resident, a graduate of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, leads a staff of 31 on an ambitious strategy to boost the number of broadly skilled volunteers throughout the state and match them to local needs.

The task ahead is daunting, but Baker thanks her close-knit family and her faith for giving her the foundation to succeed. Her dad, who volunteered for United Way and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, was her first role model.

"A lot of people who looked at our family would say, 'My gosh, you have eight kids. Why are you volunteering?' But it was made clear we have so much as a family, there are so many people who don't have enough, we need to be out there helping. That value was constantly emphasized."

The Bakers moved from Dayton, Ohio, to Sacramento when Karen was a teen. Her next civic role model was an older sister who worked among the poor for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Portland. Karen joined JVC when she was in her early 20s, never expecting she would find her calling there.

"I went in thinking, 'I'll do my one year.' But their tag line, 'Ruined for life,' is true. You can't turn your eye anymore," she said.

Baker learned she did not have a vocation for social work but was drawn to political and leadership roles in service organizations. In 2005, her career had taken her from Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles to Sacramento, where Schwarzenegger named



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her to head California Volunteers. Two back-to-back ordeals in 2007, the Southern California wildfires and the Cosco Busan oil spill in San Francisco Bay, would forge their working relationship and lead to upgrading the volunteer director's role to the governor's cabinet.

Both disasters proved, first, how many Californians are willing to spontaneously volunteer and, second, the impact they can have when their efforts are organized. But it was also demonstrated that more people would volunteer if they knew what to do and where to go.

One tactic Baker has developed in the early months of her tenure is the volunteer secretary's website, californiavolunteers.org, which lists 40,000 volunteer opportunities gathered from 17 sources. "What this is about is letting Californians know there's a clear mechanism for getting them involved," she said.

Baker is approaching the job as if it were a business opportunity. She sees her role as brokering between suppliers and users.

The task is to organize both the supply of volunteers – sources include faith organizations and pro sports teams – and to align with local social service needs, disaster response and other areas.

"Both sides of the marketplace are crying out," she said. "I would love to hire 100 people. If I had my dream, I'd like to have expertise in the functional areas covering all of the different areas of community need. And on the supply side, covering all the possible sources."

Baker's priorities include creating a Disaster Volunteer Corps, recruiting from non-private and private organizations and making it easier for volunteers to clear liability hurdles, such as criminal background checks, before they can serve.

Baker is in the midst of a 30-city "listening tour" to canvass service suppliers and consumers throughout the state. One message she wants to send to potential volunteers is that a helper need not be a

case worker to be of service. Her own story proves the point.

"I think what can be hard for people is what to do when you want to help and you don't want to be a social worker," she said. "You're supposed to be searching for another way, a way that resonates with you."

Baker and her husband, Edward, have two children, Ella, 5, and Christopher, 2. They are parishioners at St. Ignatius Parish in Sacramento.

"Our family life is about daily prayers, morning and evening, and being involved in service projects," Baker said. "I've got pictures of my five-year-old when she was three months at a community garden project celebrating Dr. King's holiday.

"We also do a thing we created on our own, a prayer of gratitude with our children," she said. "Every night we sit down with our kids and have them tell us what they're most grateful for, to build up a sense of gratitude."