

## CLOSE TO HOME

# Community means getting to know neighbors

By **PATRICK GRATTAN** and  
**PHYLLIS ROSENFELD**

**I**n our bountiful Sonoma County, with people from many different backgrounds, how can we, as a community, become more inclusive and proactive problem solvers?

This is one of the questions that The Survivor Project's newest program, the Community Listening Project, strives to address.

By bringing together people from diverse community groups across Sonoma County in an effort to build empathy, understanding and communication, the project aims to break down the barriers of ignorance and intolerance through the process of listening to the voices and looking into the faces of our own neighbors.

Using oral history techniques, the Community Listening Project creates a structure that allows people to come to know one another, cross boundaries and slip a toe into someone else's shoe.

This is a pivotal time for Sonoma County.

A rapidly changing and increasingly diverse population creates both opportunities for and challenges to the creation of a healthy community. Many of these challenges arise from fear, ignorance and lack of interaction — which too often lead to divisions, hostility and even violence.

As the Community Action Program report stated a few years ago, there is a higher level of racism in Sonoma County than is generally acknowledged by public leaders and the media. The report indicated that, in all aspects of community life — from services, to education to political representation — a significant population of Sonoma County feels disenfranchised.

The Community Listening Project trains volunteers to conduct recorded interviews with people from diverse ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, generational, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds about their life sto-

ries and personal experiences.

Each volunteer interviewer conducts interviews with community members of his choosing. Interviewers are encouraged to select neighbors, colleagues, or even strangers from backgrounds different than their own. In addition to learning about the person's life, interviewers ask specific questions about their subject's experiences of and perspectives on local issues, especially those regarding acceptance of diversity.

The Survivor Project is launching a public awareness campaign. Soon you will see posters containing photographs and excerpts from statements of interviewees displayed in public places. Statements are in English and a second language, if the interviewee speaks two languages. In addition, we are working with the Community Media Center and KRCB television/radio to create public service announcements that will be aired on television and radio. Radio

KBBF is also participating. These public displays of community members' life stories will help define the composition of our community, create a cohesive identity and recognize our common humanity.

A steering committee has conducted presentations to 30 diverse cultural organizations throughout the county and has provided venues for workshops and a library-like check-out system for recording devices.

The schedule for the fall workshops at the Volunteer Center is available and there are openings.

If you would like to participate as an interviewer or interviewee, please contact The Survivor Project at 578-5420 or [info@thesurvivorproject.org](mailto:info@thesurvivorproject.org). Please visit our Web site at [www.thesurvivorproject.org](http://www.thesurvivorproject.org)

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*Patrick Grattan is the chairman and Phyllis Rosenfeld is the director of The Survivor Project and the Community Listening Project.*