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Karen Landis DeWitt looks back on first year with Ag Against Hunger



Karen Landis DeWitt and her dog, Cocoa, are shown in front of Ag Against Hunger's Spreckels office. Robert Walch

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Celebrating her first anniversary last month as the Executive Director of Ag Against Hunger, Karen Landis DeWitt looked back on a very busy 12 months.

One of the major changes DeWitt made was relocating the organization's office from Abbott Street in Salinas to Spreckels.

The Las Palmas Ranch resident explained she

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drove through Spreckels each day to work. In September she noticed a "for rent" sign in front of a small house on Hatton Avenue.

DeWitt said that although she wasn't looking for a new office location she decided to investigate. She was delighted to discover the owners of the property, Paul and Cindy Kohatsu, were supportive of Ag Against Hunger and donated to the organization.

Liking the feel of the small house with its white picket fence and its convenient location to nearby ag companies, DeWitt worked out a one-year lease. The move was made in November. Explaining that it's nice to be part of the small, closely knit community, DeWitt said the small house is ideal for Ag Against Hunger's needs. One of the older buildings in Spreckels, the house has enough space for a reception area, conference room and offices. In the past the house was used as a Montessori school and private residence.

"I think this office has a very comfortable, homey feeling and people enjoy stopping in because of that," DeWitt said. "With just myself and one staff person, we have plenty of room."

With DeWitt's dog Cocoa, who sometimes accompanies her to work, meeting visitors at the door, the overall ambience is very informal and certainly welcoming.

Since the house is on the route that many local residents walk to pick up their mail, DeWitt said she has already had a local woman stop in to say hello and offer to volunteer at the office.

Besides learning the ins and outs of her new position and making the move to new quarters, DeWitt has had to try to meet the ever-increasing need for the produce her organization supplies to food banks throughout the tri-county area.

In its 21st year of existence, Ag Against Hunger collects fresh produce from local growers and packers. The produce is either obtained directly from the packing plants or gleaned from the growers' fields after commercial harvesting. The produce is held in the organization's cooler until it is transferred to the area's food banks, which then pass it on to those most in need.

DeWitt said her first year on the job "went quickly." She also remarked that there probably hasn't been a year in her life since she was a college student that she learned so much.

"This job has a lot of 'moving parts,' from fundraising and writing grants to operating a cooler," she said. "I have had to learn a lot."

The organization collected more than 12 million pounds of food, making 2010 a pretty good year, she said. The nonprofit was able to meet local food bank requests.

DeWitt was also happy to expand Ag Against Hunger's relationship

with the Fresno Food Bank. The two organizations increased their exchange of food with trucks taking leafy greens to the valley and then returning to Salinas with fruit, onions and yams.

"This was the first year we were able to actually trade over the winter months, which worked out well for everyone," she said.

On the slight downside, DeWitt said the donations of funds last year didn't quite meet her expectations.

"We are completely privately funded, so we rely on the cash donations to help us fulfill our mission," she said. "Fortunately, some individuals did step up at the end of the year to help us out, and that was greatly appreciated."

For the first time, strawberries became part of the organization's mix of produce when Red Blossom Farms invited Ag Against Hunger volunteers to do a field glean. "Along with King City Nursery, Red Blossom Farms also became a financial donor as well," DeWitt said.

As part of their Saturday field gleaning program, Ag Against Hunger also enjoyed an increase in volunteers, especially students.

"We set a record of 150 people at our final glean of last season," she said.

The work that Ag Against Hunger does did not go unnoticed last year, either. The organization's new board president, April England-Mackie, accepted an award on behalf of Ag Against Hunger from the San Benito County Food Bank as the Food Donor of the Year for 2010.

Already into her second year at the helm, DeWitt is working on finalizing fundraising plans that include participating in the Human Race in Santa Cruz in May, sponsoring the annual Ag Woman of the Year luncheon in June, and participating in a new event, "Fight Hunger Night," at the California Rodeo Salinas in July.

"With more state and local budget cuts to social services coming this year, the need for food is going to be greater than ever," DeWitt said, explaining why she has to keep "growing" the organization's programs.

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