

Food pantry asks: Who can keep up with Jones?

Executive director of Santa Rosa FISH to step down after 25 years

By **CHRIS SMITH**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Jeanne-Marie Jones, who's 91, has not earned 2 cents through the 25 years that she's worked to sustain Santa Rosa's highly unusual and essential FISH food pantry.

Yet Jones, lean and precise and effusive, will tell you she's richly rewarded. It was like receiving a fat bonus when a client told her she can't imagine being without the groceries she receives for free from FISH each month because once she pays her rent and other bills,

what's left for food is \$17.

Jones sees the faces of the nearly 40 percent of FISH patrons who are children. She fields the gratitude of the more than 300 seniors who come by every month for fresh and canned fruits and vegetables, a bit of chicken or beef, beans, soup, peanut butter, tuna, bread, maybe a little something sweet.

Jones' compensation is the knowledge that what she and the other 70 or so FISH volunteers do six days a week in an office space on McBride Lane, north of Coddington Mall, is vital to so many who struggle to keep a roof overhead and food on the table in an increasingly costly area of California.

"The economy is supposed to

be so great," she said. "The rent just kills people."

Jones the other day told the FISH volunteers and board of directors something they dreaded hearing. She will step away in April.

Given the age of the long-retired school office employee and her quarter-century of service to FISH, 14 of those years as executive director, one might imagine that she is no longer physically up to the work, or that she's burned out or just can't take any more of the human deprivation and hardship that she witnesses daily.

None of the above. "It's just time to step aside and let a modern person step



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Jeanne-Marie Jones is retiring as the executive director of the F.I.S.H. food pantry in Santa Rosa.

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in," Jones said.

She has never plugged into computers and the internet, and she believes that for the good of FISH she should yield to someone able to connect it to some of the benefits and efficiencies of the digital world.

How the nearly 45-year-old FISH operates is indeed fairly old-school, but also quite remarkable.

Anyone who desires

groceries must phone in advance so that volunteers know they're coming, and can have their bag or bags of food ready for them. A slip of paper advises a volunteer in the packing area whether any particular client needs food for one, for two or three, for four to six, or seven or more.

From beneath one or another of her trademark head-warmer caps — a food pantry is often a chilly place — Jones beams with pride over the many special qualities and services of FISH

Foremost, it's open and

available to people in need every day but Sunday. Food is distributed from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekdays, and from 10:30 a.m. to noon on Saturdays.

That hour and a half on Saturdays isn't much time, Jones said, "but it helps all the people who have worked all week."

People requesting food from FISH aren't required to prove that they're poor. It's important also to Jones and the other volunteers that what goes into the bags isn't all canned foods but also fresh fruits and vegetables whenever possible, and eggs and meat.

If the FISH crew finds itself without chicken to beef to give, Jones said, one will make a run to Costco for hot dogs.

The enterprise of caring receives regular donations of food from markets, notably the Trader Joe's on Cleveland Avenue and the Yulupa Avenue Whole Foods.

Those groceries are safe and edible, but have reached their "Best If Purchased By" dates. FISH also purchases food by the pound from the Redwood Empire Food Bank.

The pantry relies on cash donations for the purchases it makes.

"All donations are very much appreciated," Jones said. "We have several people send us \$10 a month, faithfully. Well, at the end of the year, that's \$120!"

Since 2013, the volunteers also have had to pay rent.

Prior to that time, FISH was allowed by the city of Santa Rosa to use a former firehouse on Benton Street for free. But in mid-2012, City Hall notified Jones and the crew that they must move out because

the building was not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and that to bring it up to standard would be too costly for the city.

The low-budget FISH went in search of a rental property it could afford. Local people kicked in money for rent, and former City Council member Dave Berto gave the volunteers a break on an a space in a commercial complex he owns on McBride Lane.

Jones said it has been wonderful to have the use of the offices, but she believes than in order to feel confident about its future, FISH must own its own space.

She anticipates that her successor as executive director may mount a capital campaign for funds to buy a new home for the pantry, which each year gives away about 600,000 pounds of food.

Who will step up as the operation's next unpaid executive director? Jones said she's hopeful that a member of the FISH board of directors will rise to the challenge.

Whomever takes her place, Jones feels it is proper and respectful that she entirely excuse herself once her resignation takes effect in early April.

"I will disappear," she said.

"I will miss it terribly. I'll just have to find something else."

Some fellow volunteers at the extraordinary little food pantry have their doubts that after all these years, Jeanne-Marie Jones will be able to stay away entirely. They hope she won't.

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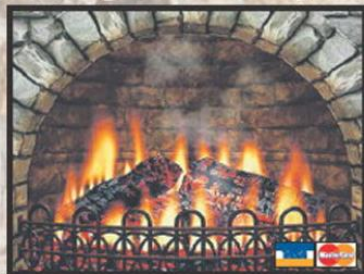
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