



***Celebrating Ten Years
Of Service
2000-2010***



Margo Warnecke Merck grew up mostly in New York and San Francisco but spent her childhood summers at the ranch and vineyard on the Russian River that's been in her family for several generations. She graduated from Stanford in 1972 and later received her masters in architecture from Columbia University. She helped run one of the country's largest architecture firms founded by her father, the renowned architect John Carl Warnecke.

In 1996, Margo and her husband, Al Merck moved back to Sonoma County where they built a home that Margo designed near Healdsburg. That same year Margo became involved in advocating on behalf of her brother who had been released from a State Mental Hospital in Eureka California and had been sent to live a board and care facility in Fresno, far away from his home and family. With her swift involvement the County changed course and allowed him to stay in Sonoma County. Thus began her involvement in mental health advocacy and passion for developing permanent supportive housing.

In 1998, she and some like minded friends started HAG -- the Housing Advocacy Group -- to pressure, coax and occasionally litigate in order to get local governments to provide more affordable and very low income housing for persons with disabilities, the most vulnerable members of our community.

Margo, along with HAG, was instrumental in getting a bill - SB 520 - passed in 2001 which made it unlawful for cities throughout California to restrict development of housing for persons with disabilities. The law has made it much easier for non-profits throughout the state to develop housing of all kinds for persons with disabilities. When it looked like the homeless shelter in Guerneville would have to shut down a few years ago, Margo used that law to get the County to allow a new winter shelter to open at the Veterans Building even though it wasn't a permitted use under the applicable zoning.

In 1998, Margo became involved with Community Housing Sonoma County to help develop permanent supportive housing for people living with disabilities. Permanent supportive housing

has traditionally been the most difficult kind of housing to build and operate. Margo's "CHDO" - a HUD acronym for Community Housing Development Organization -- has been spectacularly successful in developing new supportive housing units throughout the County - Vida Nueva in Rohnert Park; West Hearn (transitional housing for homeless veterans), Brown Street, and Stony Point Commons in Santa Rosa. Over 179 very low income units have been built through the collaborative efforts of this CHDO, 71 of those specifically set aside as permanent supportive housing. Paula Cook, its current Executive Director, continues this extremely important work.

While she's cut back recently on some of her community work in order to help run the family vineyard, she continues to push for special needs housing and this summer is starting an artists' residency program at the ranch with her nieces. Her brother Rodger lives nearby and comes out to the ranch every week to paint.

She is always looking for suitable sites where special needs housing can be built and is seeking to collaborate with other developers, jurisdictions and service providers. Just two months ago, she helped a local non-profit secure \$3.1 million in federal funding to build farm worker housing in the Healdsburg area. Please let her know if you have a location or project idea that you think would work.

“Sonoma County Housing Coalition, sponsor of Affordable Housing Week, is a group of over 100 housing interests working year-round to provide housing for low and moderate income County residents.”

For more information on the SCHC please follow this link to their website.
<http://affordablehousingsonomacounty.org/>

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