

COMMUNITY MATTERS

SUBMITTED BY MAXIMILIAN BUSCHMAN | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MAXIMILIAN BUSCHMAN

This month, we connected with Maximilian Buschman, Development Manager at Community Matters. Community Matters works to transform school and community climates by preventing bullying and creating safe, inclusive environments. Through youth empowerment, evidence-based training, and restorative practices, particularly their Safe School Ambassadors® Program, they engage students and adults to build positive social-emotional learning environments that foster belonging and respect.

1. How did this non-profit come about?

Community Matters was founded in 1996 by Rick Phillips with a belief that young people can play a meaningful role in creating safer, more inclusive schools. In the wake of the Columbine High School tragedy, the need for proactive approaches to school safety became even clearer. In 2000, Community Matters launched its flagship program, Safe School Ambassadors® (SSA), to equip students with skills to prevent and intervene in mistreatment before it escalates. Our work centers on empowering youth voice, strengthening school climate and building relationships from the inside out.

2. How many people do you support?

We support thousands of students and educators each year. During the 2024-2025 school year alone, more than 5,700 students were empowered by SSA, along with over 1000 educators nationwide. In Sonoma County, we reached nearly 1000 students and close to 200 educators across 40 schools. Over time, Community Matters has worked in 42 states, Washington DC, Puerto Rico, Guam, Japan, Paraguay, and Canada, lifting up close to 200,000 students and over 33,000 adults.

3. How do people find out about what you do?

Most people learn about us through word of mouth and long-standing relationships with schools and districts. We also connect with the



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community through our website, social media, national education conferences, and presentations at local service clubs and community gatherings.

4. What services do you offer?

We provide research-based programs that promote safer, more welcoming schools and communities. Our flagship program, SSA, trains diverse groups of students to recognize and prevent mistreatment, bullying, and harmful behaviors. For younger students, Safe School Buddies (SSB) builds early skills in empathy and inclusion. We also offer Restorative Practices training for educators and school staff, along with Waking Up Courage assemblies that engage students through storytelling and interactive experiences.

5. Where is your non-profit located?

We are headquartered in Santa Rosa, CA, and work with schools nationwide, with a strong presence in Sonoma County.

6. How do you see your non-profit growing? What is your vision for its future?

Our vision is to expand access to our programs so more schools can proactively address mistreatment and school climate challenges. We aim to deepen partnerships and support more students and educators in building inclusive school communities.

7. What kind of support do you need?

We rely on community champions who help spread awareness of our programs and donate goods and services. Advocacy, introductions to schools and districts, event participation, and volunteer engagement all help extend our impact.

8. What are your most immediate needs?

Our immediate priorities include expanding access in underserved schools, strengthening community partnerships, and increasing awareness of our prevention-based approaches to school safety and belonging.

9. How do people get in touch with you to help?

Community members can connect with us through our social media channels, Community-Matters.org, by emailing team@community-matters.org, or by calling 707-823-6159. They can also sign up for our newsletter on our website to stay up to date on our work.

10. Is there anything else you want our readers to know?

We will host our Annual UPstander Luncheon on May 15, 2026, at Sally Tomatoes in Rohnert Park. This event brings together supporters, educators, and community leaders to celebrate our collective impact and share our vision for safer, more inclusive schools. We invite readers to join us in celebrating the community that makes this work possible. For more information, check out the events on our website at Community-Matters.org.



Mallory Lambert Silipo

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