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ERICA VOGEL: Ambassador of Youth Empowerment

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ERICA VOGEL: Ambassador of Youth Empowerment

BY CATHERINE HUGHES | PHOTOS BY SHEILA JOHNSON, STUDIO J PHOTOGRAPHY

On any given weekday morning in Sebastopol, California, Erica Vogel drives Highway 12 to work in Santa Rosa, passing cattle farms, fields of native bunchgrasses, and oak trees framing the Laguna de Santa Rosa wetlands. Traffic backs up, as it often does, but Vogel doesn't mind. She turns up the volume on her favorite music and takes in the view. *Look where I get to live*, she thinks.

She's often thinking about purpose, power, and place—the three elements of a youth empowerment framework she's spent the last fifteen years putting into practice at Community Matters, a nonprofit dedicated to creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools and communities.

It's a long way from Saint Luke's Hospital in San Francisco, where Vogel was born, and farther still from Jackson County, Michigan, where she would later spend several years as a nonprofit leader with the YMCA, the American Heart Association, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. But the journey back to Sonoma County was deliberate. It was a homecoming shaped by a longing to return to a place she dearly loves.

Vogel is the CEO of Community Matters. Its flagship program, Safe School Ambassadors, trains socially influential students, often not the traditional honor-roll leaders, but the kids their peers actually follow, to step

in when they witness bullying or mistreatment on campus. The program operates in more than 2,200 schools across the USA, (including Guam, Puerto Rico, Japan, Paraguay, and Canada) and has trained over 180,000 young people in constructive peer-to-peer communication and de-escalation tools. It's evidence-based, research-backed, and, according to Vogel, urgently needed.

"We're not talking about your student-council president," she explains. "We're talking about the kid who doesn't typically get nominated for scholarships or awards, but who has real influence in the circles of social interactions on campus."

Growing up in San Francisco, Vogel was raised by her single mother alongside her sister, Freya. The girls traveled to and from school on city transit, and as they grew older, their mother, Judy, began to worry about raising teenagers in the city. In 1984, when Vogel was thirteen, the family moved to Sebastopol.

She couldn't sleep at first; the silence was too loud after years of falling asleep to the sounds of a busy city. But Sonoma County gave her something San Francisco hadn't: proximity to the Sonoma County Family YMCA camp. At thirteen, she became a volunteer counselor-in-training. It was her first experience working with young children, and she loved it from the start. By sixteen, as soon as she was old enough to be hired, she applied to be a camp counselor and spent every summer, spring break, and winter break working at the YMCA.



Erica Vogel (bottom left) with the Community Matters board and staff, July 2025.



Community Matters founder Rick Phillips and CEO Erica Vogel with the Safe School Ambassadors program.



Erica Vogel with her family: (left to right) youngest son & UC grad Trenton, retired Navy Corpsman husband Leif, proud Erica, and oldest son Spencer, a mental health nurse.

"I just loved it," she says. "I felt like I was making a difference."

When Vogel started college at Santa Rosa Junior College, her former boss, Jeannie Dulberg, a Sebastopol resident who became her mentor, hired her to help open a YMCA extension in Rohnert Park. Vogel began as an office manager but quickly realized she had found her calling.

"I not only loved working with kids," she says, "but also being in the nonprofit arena to serve the community."

At nineteen, she accepted a full-time position with the YMCA in 1990, continuing her college studies part-time while learning to develop programs alongside the communities they served. In 1993, she met the love of her life, Leif Vogel. They were married at his parents' house in Sebastopol in 1995.

By 1996, Vogel was ready for a change and wanted to explore living in another state. Her husband was supportive. "Wherever you want to go," he told her. Her work with the YMCA brought her to Jackson, Michigan, where she attended Spring Arbor University while continuing to serve her community through the YMCA, the American Heart Association, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Jackson County.

When Community Matters later came calling, Vogel and her husband had two children, Spencer and Trenton. The family was excited about moving back to California, though Vogel worried about her older son, Spencer, who would be entering middle school during what she describes as "such a transitional period." He ended up thriving at Hillcrest Middle School in Sebastopol.

The move itself was daunting in a different way. Her husband had a job lined up; she didn't. It was the first time since she was nineteen that Vogel had to look for work. "It was kind of scary," she admits. Friends encouraged her to wait and get settled first, but while scrolling through Craigslist job listings, she came across an opening for an outreach director at Community Matters.

"It sounded like exactly what I'd been searching for," she says.

She didn't get it; someone else was hired. Vogel moved her family anyway, determined to wait for the right opportunity.

Then the director who had interviewed her called. Another position at Community Matters had opened up, and Vogel accepted it. She's been there ever since, rising through the ranks to become CEO in 2020.

The timing was significant. Within days of taking the helm, the pandemic shut everything down. Schools closed. Students stayed home. Community Matters shifted its model to support young people who were suddenly isolated, emphasizing the importance of building positive connections and tending to mental health during an unprecedented time.

When students returned to in-person learning, Vogel and her team noticed something troubling. Many kids seemed socially and emotionally behind their developmental level.

"It felt like they were a year or two behind—not just academically, but socially," she says. "A lot of students are still struggling. Being at a school where they feel safe, welcomed, and included makes a difference."

What makes Safe School Ambassadors effective, Vogel says, isn't just its focus on bullying prevention; it's the way the program reframes leadership. By identifying and equipping students who already shape peer culture, it gives them the opportunity to use their influence intentionally and for good.

"If students have a place where they feel a sense of purpose, power over their goals, and a place they feel connected," Vogel says, "then they're going to find meaning in their lives. Otherwise, they'll find it somewhere else."

The program emphasizes practice over theory. Students learn skills they can use in real-life situations, not just during training sessions.

"We build them up and give them the tools they need to make a difference in their own community," Vogel explains. "What we find is that kids want to know they matter. Once they see that they do, they lean into it and find new meaning for themselves."

Vogel practices what she preaches. For several years, she served as president of the Analy High School boosters. While her alma mater is El Molino, both her sons and her husband attended Analy. She has also served on oversight committees with West County schools.

"I love our community," she says.

Even while living in Michigan and contemplating the high cost of living in California, Vogel couldn't shake the pull of Sonoma County.

"There are challenges here, like anywhere else," she acknowledges. "But I feel so grateful driving to work. I can see the mountains in the distance. I know how fortunate I am to be living here." She pauses, thinking again about that morning commute: the oak trees, the open fields, the traffic backup on Highway 12.

"I get my purpose, power, and place through the work that I do and where I get to live," she says.

It's a fitting philosophy for someone who has spent her career helping young people discover their own. The Safe School Ambassadors aren't just preventing bullying; they're learning that they matter, that their voices can shape what happens around them, and that they belong. From a thirteen-year-old volunteer at a YMCA camp to the CEO of an organization that has reached nearly 200,000 students, Vogel has lived the framework she now teaches.

And on those mornings when traffic backs up on Highway 12, she turns up the music and looks toward the mountains. She knows exactly where she belongs.

To learn more about Community Matters and the Safe School Ambassadors program, visit community-matters.org.

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