

Women in Conversation

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Honoring Women Shaping the North Bay: Allison Goodwin

You can keep your sunglasses on. You can leave the radio playing. If you don't feel like talking to anyone, you don't have to.

When Allison Goodwin helped design the Redwood Empire Food Bank's drive-through distributions after the fires, some of the most important questions weren't about inventory or traffic flow. They were about what it would take for someone who had never sought food assistance to pull into the parking lot, and keep going. "It was about finding a little bit of familiarity in the discomfort," Allison says, "because you're doing something for the very first time."

That attention to discomfort is central to how Allison leads. As president and CEO of the Redwood Empire Food Bank, she oversees an operation that includes more than 300 food distributions across five counties, 122 partner organizations and more than 7,000 volunteers. Its scale depends on logistics, procurement and constant contingency planning. Yet the experience she wants for the person receiving groceries is something simpler: safety, consistency, and as little additional strain as possible.

Allison has worked at the food bank for more than a decade, most of it on the program side. She became interim president and CEO in the spring of 2024 and took the position permanently that September. Before joining the food bank, she spent 12 years at the Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County, working in subsidized childcare. Her understanding of the people the food bank serves is also personal. During a difficult period when its resources could have helped her own family, Allison knew the organization existed. What she did not understand was that it was meant for someone like her.

"I think my assumption was maybe not that different than other people, where you think, well, food bank—is that canned food, and is it dented cans or expired food?" she says. She is careful not to frame her hesitation as shame. "I genuinely thought, well, that's not really what my family eats." Beneath that was another familiar calculation: "There are other people that probably need it more than I do."

The drive-through distributions answered those assumptions one small decision at a time. People did not have to find the right entrance, figure out where to stand or wonder whether they would be expected to explain themselves. They could remain in the familiar space of their own cars. The invitation was equally deliberate: If the fires had affected you, these groceries were for you. Anyone facing food insecurity was welcome, but the message spoke directly to people who might never have imagined themselves needing help. "I felt like it was important for people to hear, 'No, no, no, I'm talking to you,'" Allison says. "You, who maybe never pictured yourself in this situation before."

It is an example of a sophisticated kind of leadership: identifying the cost someone else is carrying, then redesigning the experience so the organization carries more of it instead.

For Allison, a strong safety net should not require people to prove their need, master a system, or make a long-term commitment before they can use it.

Her years in subsidized childcare gave her a useful comparison. Childcare assistance can feel like a golden ticket, she says. Once a family receives it, they hold on because earning a little more one month does not mean they can afford the full cost, and giving up the benefit may mean they cannot get it back.

The food bank is designed differently.

"People can bow in and bow out at any time," she says. "The system is not built in a way that you have to cling to it." Someone recovering from surgery might come for three weeks and never return. Someone living on a fixed income might rely on a distribution at an affordable housing site twice a month for years. "Neither one of those things is better than the other. It's just everybody's circumstance can be different."

Some people promise they will return as volunteers to make up for accepting help. Allison is quick to release them from that obligation, too. "This is not it for us." The food bank is there to be load-bearing when someone needs it, without asking to remain part of the story when they do not. That philosophy becomes harder to maintain when the strain is on the organization itself.

Federal commodities are the food bank's first resource because they arrive at no cost. Donated food comes next, although collecting and transporting it still costs money. Purchased food fills the remaining gaps with donor dollars.



Starting in March 2025, scheduled truckloads of federal food were canceled. About \$750,000 worth of food expected over 12 weeks did not arrive, which was a loss the organization could not simply replace, especially when eggs cost eight dollars a dozen.

The food bank adjusted its provision, alternating milk and eggs with chicken and shelf-stable proteins. The changes continued for about eight months. After the community stepped up with increased giving at the end of 2025, distributions returned to their regular mix of produce, protein, milk and eggs in January.

The people arriving for groceries did not need to solve, or even see, the uncertainty behind the box.

"I do like to think that, from a participant standpoint, it's none of their business where the food came from," Allison says. "And I say that with all due respect. That's my problem. That's not their problem."

It may be the clearest expression of her leadership. Allison and her team track how many months of rice or frozen protein are on hand, when to stop waiting for a federal delivery and when to purchase a truckload themselves. They absorb the uncertainty so a family can arrive expecting food that is nourishing and reliable.

The complexity underneath is substantial; the service is meant to feel seamless. Sometimes protecting that experience also means reconsidering one of a nonprofit's most familiar goals: visibility.

Most food bank distributions happen outdoors, and its trucks are among its most recognizable assets. "Our truck is our billboard," Allison says. But during a period of heightened fear, that visibility became a source of exposure for some of the people the organization was trying to reach.

An open parking lot beside a branded truck did not feel safe to everyone. The answer was not to make the food bank harder to find. It was to give the person seeking help more control over whether they had to be seen. A long-standing proxy program, originally useful when someone had a medical appointment or lacked transportation, allowed participants to designate a trusted person to collect groceries for them. It is a quiet inversion of the usual leadership instinct.

Allison has to make the food bank visible enough for people to know help is available, while reducing its visibility around those who may be put at risk by receiving it. The institution can take up space; the people it serves do not have to.

The same care appears in less visible choices: keeping a distribution calm when people arrive anxious, making expectations clear, and training volunteers to meet stress with steadiness. Allison cannot control the forces that bring someone to the food bank. She can shape what happens once they arrive.

"There's been a lot going on in the world," she says, "that we've just tried to be a solid, reliable, kind place for people."

Allison is quick to point out that the food bank does not create that stability alone. A Sonoma County native raised in Penn Grove, she now lives in Windsor and is raising five children here. She describes the region as a place where people reliably show up for one another. Faith communities, veterans halls, community centers and city buildings host distributions. Businesses volunteer, donate, and advocate. When the food bank issues a call to action, people respond.

"If you're going to be facing hunger in a community, at least it's in this one," she says.

Even when people prefer to give anonymously, Allison gently encourages them to share why they care: not for recognition, but because their example might bring someone else in. "You could inspire more giving by sharing your story."

Allison has been described as a servant leader. She resists the title, not because she rejects service, but because sacrifice is not how she experiences the work.

"I like to think that I've just been lucky enough to do what I want," she says. "I don't know that I would title it 'servant leader.'" She would rather talk about the fun of being creative, working with people she likes and finding better ways to show up for someone who may need help "for a minute or for the rest of their life."

For Allison, commitment does not have to be solemn to be serious. She talks about the food bank as "a club that you didn't imagine wanting to be in, but you're very grateful that it exists." In her care, it's a place people can enter without debt or explanation, receive what they need and then get on with their day.

Outside work, that instinct has found another outlet. When Allison's daughter asked for a puppy for her 14th birthday, Allison said no; the family already had two dogs and two cats. Then she offered an alternative: they could foster. Four and a half years later, the family has cared for roughly 119 animals, mostly dogs, through Dogwood Animal Rescue.

Fostering means taking on the early uncertainty and helping an animal feel secure, teaching it what home and affection can be, so another family can begin from a place of trust. Allison describes it as "great practice, loving something and letting it go."

It is also a fitting reflection of the way she shapes Sonoma County: doing the complicated work of creating safety, then making it easier for someone else to step forward without having to carry everything that came before.

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