

KATHLEEN REYNOLDS

13 YEARS AT THE HELM OF NAPA VALLEY COMMUNITY HOUSING

By Sasha Paulsen

As Kathleen Reynolds prepares to retire after 13 years at the helm of Napa Valley Community Housing (NVCH), she reflected back on the twists and turns and cross-country journeys that brought her to the experience—and she looked ahead to her next steps.

NVCH, a non-profit organization, is the primary manager of affordable housing in Napa County. They build and maintain units throughout the valley. Additionally, they provide resident services, including teaching life and leadership skills that will help people move on. “I’ve loved the experience, every day of it,” said Reynolds, who as president and CEO, oversees a staff of 42. “The staff is great and they do really good work.” The job, however, was something she had never imagined she would be doing.

Growing up, Reynolds’s goal was to be a writer. The daughter of Irish immigrants, she was 9 when her family moved from Amityville, New York to San Francisco, where her father, a plasterer, had work. When an injury forced an early end to this career, he studied electronics at night school and found another job in Manteca, in California’s Central Valley. “I was 13 when we moved,” she said. “It was quite a culture shock. I remember driving with my dad and we saw a sagebrush roll across the road. I thought, ‘Where are we?’” She read a book that advised would-be writers to study drama and she enjoyed theater classes, “but my dad was worried I might become an actress.” At Sacramento State University, she majored in communications. “I figured that was close to writing but I wouldn’t have to do as many research papers as an English major.”

After graduation she was working at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers’ distribution center in Santa Rosa when she met businessman Bill Dreessen. Two years later they married and moved to Pleasant Hill, which led them to Napa Valley. “We bought a condo at Silverado and we would go there to play golf,” she said. They kept the condo when Bill was transferred back east. They lived in Philadelphia and New York, but they visited Napa when they could.

Meanwhile, Kathleen landed a New York literary agent and published several romance novels. “I couldn’t believe my luck,” she said. Napa Valley kept drawing them back, however. “One day we finally decided, ‘Let’s just move there.’ They never regretted their decision, and as they settled into a home in North Napa, her writing career grew. In addition to novels, she wrote for local publications including Napa Valley Marketplace, the Napa Valley Register and North Bay Biz, and they became involved in the Napa community.

Then in 2000, Bill fell ill, and Kathleen had to become the family breadwinner, something hard to accomplish as a freelance writer. This is when a friend told her that Napa Valley Community Housing (NVCH) was looking for a new Executive Director. “I’d written articles about affordable housing in the North Bay Biz and knew NVCH was a really good organization,” she said. “I’d also learned about them when I took part in Leadership Napa Valley. I wasn’t sure what I had to offer to them but I thought it was worth trying.” The interview process took two months. She recalled the day she got a call from the executive recruiter. “We were talking about different things and suddenly he said, ‘You do know you got the job, don’t you?’”

And her learning curve began.

Napa Valley Community Housing was created by a merger between two local housing non-profits: Housing Association for Napa Development

and Napa Valley Family Homes. When she started, the 2008 budget was just over \$1.2 million and she was in charge of finding the funds. “Our goal is to find, build and maintain attractive, safe and decent places for people to live — and to avoid the stigma of ‘affordable housing,’” Reynolds said. “The point is not to keep people in our housing but to help them move on. It is really hard to break out of the cycle of poverty.” To add to the challenge, she started the job in October 2007. “When the recession of 2008 hit, money for new construction dried up completely,” she said.



Kathleen Reynolds

After her husband passed away in 2009, Reynolds poured her efforts into running the vital service during a challenging economic time—with affordable housing becoming increasingly rare. She found herself learning “the ins and outs of building affordable housing.” She also had to study for and take exams to get a real estate broker’s license, while overseeing two new construction sites and one major rehab of properties. NVCH now manages property valued at more than \$142 million. The 2019-20 budget is \$2.1 million.

Her hard work paid off. In 2010 NVCH was named the Outstanding Nonprofit of the Year by Napa Chamber of Commerce and Mechanics Bank. It also received the 2014 Non-Profit of Excellence distinction by the Center for Volunteer & Nonprofit Leadership (CVNL). Reynolds herself was awarded the Napa Chamber of Commerce Ambassador of the Year in 2016 and Excellence in Leadership by CVNL in 2018. She is the immediate past chairwoman of the statewide California Coalition for Rural Housing and received a National Distinguished Leadership Award from the Community Leadership Foundation.

Acquiring this background in construction had another unexpected consequence. In 2012, she met contractor and construction superintendent Bruce Reynolds, and they began dating. They married in 2015.

Another challenge for her organization arrived with the wildfires of 2017, which destroyed thousands of homes. “When the fires began we were working on a 140-unit rehab and, because the renovations were extensive, we had to relocate all residents,” Reynolds said. “This further decreased the inventory of available housing.” The losses from the fires continue to be a problem today. “We have a less than one percent vacancy,” she said. “We had to close waiting lists.”

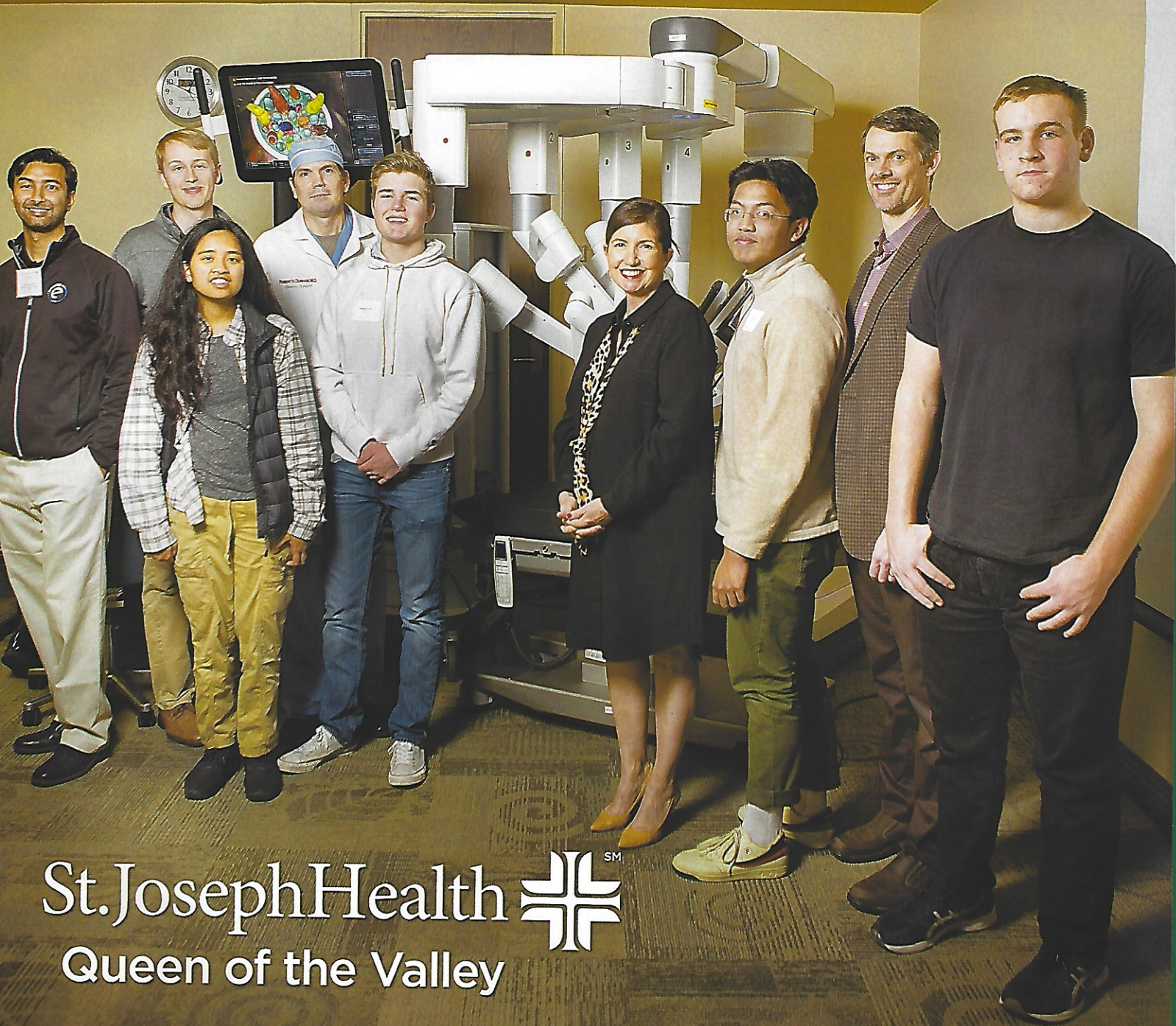
Reynolds had planned to retire in June, but when the Coronavirus hit, she offered to stay on until her replacement could be hired, a process complicated by the shelter-at-home orders. Like many non-profits, they had to continue their work, while maintaining safety for their clients as well as themselves. “We are a unique group,” Reynolds said, “but the staff is great and they do a lot of good. It is satisfying to see someone who works really hard and deserves a break, get a break. It changes lives forever for them and their family.”

What are her plans, when she is able to retire? “I’m going back to my first love, writing,” Reynolds said. “It is what I always wanted to do.”

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