

Pleasant Hill insurance agent wins community hero award

■ Garcia named recipient of a national Safeco Community Hero Award

By Christie Harrington
CORRESPONDENT

Five years ago when Jay-Marie Garcia read that the food pantry in the Monument area of Concord was closing, she thought something had to be done to help the community. In response, she helped open the Monument Crisis Center in 2003 and has been volunteering with the center ever since.

For her efforts, Garcia has been chosen as one of only 30 people across the country to receive the national Safeco Community Hero Award. As part of the award, Safeco Insurance presented Garcia, an independent insurance agent whose office is in Pleasant Hill and an avid volunteer, with \$15,000 for the Monument Crisis Center.

Garcia was nominated for the award last September, when her husband Ron Garcia saw the Safeco nomination announcement and said he immediately thought of suggesting his hard-working wife. Ron, who is also an independent insurance agent, spent two hours writing a nomination letter for his wife and then submitted it without her knowledge. When he found out that Jay-Marie won the \$15,000 award, he said he was "completely shocked."

"She deserves this award because of all the time and effort she has put into the Monument Crisis Center to keep it going," Ron Garcia said. "She's an outstanding citizen, and she has a lot of passion for helping others. She deserved recognition for that."

Jay-Marie Garcia first became involved when the Monument Crisis Center was struggling to open its doors in 2003. As a new center trying to become a nonprofit agency, the center needed the backing of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency to get started.

As a member of the Diablo Vista Soroptimist club, Garcia convinced the club to act as a



SHERRY LAVARS/STAFF

JAY-MARIE GARCIA, a founding member of the Monument Crisis Center in Concord, slows down for a just moment on a busy morning at the center. Garcia is one of only 30 people nationwide who received a Community Hero Award from Safeco Insurance.

fiscal agent for the fledgling center to help the operation get off the ground.

"I wanted to keep something available for low-income families who needed assistance for food," she said.

Garcia, a Concord resident, has volunteered with the crisis center, which helps to feed impoverished families in Concord, since the beginning. When the center first opened, it served 85 families. Five years later, it now serves more than 4,000 households.

Volunteers distribute four-day food pantry supplies to people who are three times below the poverty line. The center also offers help in crisis situations, has tutoring and educational programs, and promotes community resources in the area. With only six paid staff members, they rely heavily on volunteer support, said Sandra Scherer, Monument Crisis Center executive director.

"I am passionate about the causes of the working poor," Garcia said. "In our society, you have many people who are working hard, but they can't make ends meet. Everyone should have food and a

place to live."

Although Garcia volunteers with many different crisis center programs, she said her favorite is "Senior Moments." Every other Friday, she sings for the seniors, entertains them, and sometimes even plays bingo with them. The low-income seniors also receive educational information and food to take home.

"Jay-Marie works heartily with the seniors, and the crowd just adores her," Scherer said. "Their eyes light up when she sings the old standards they remember. I think she lifts their spirits and gives them something to look forward to."

In addition to her work at the Monument Crisis Center, Garcia also is very active in her church, in the Diablo Vista Soroptimist club and in the Independent Insurance Agents Association, leading committees and volunteering.

Additionally, she has also encouraged each of those groups to give their time, money and resources to helping other groups and charities in giving back to the community.

"Jay-Marie works so hard," Scherer said. "She is a businesswoman, a mom, a wife and she runs her own company. She doesn't have time to devote to all of these causes, but she makes time. I think she's quite a role model."

The Monument Crisis Center will receive the \$15,000 that is awarded with Garcia's Community Hero Award. Scherer said the money will be spent on the center's food program, the senior program and other support services, such as tutoring and English classes.

Even with her busy life, Garcia remains committed to the Monument Crisis Center and to volunteer service.

"I think it's important that my children realize the importance of giving back and caring for the community," she said. "If your mindset is to help others, then you get involved and just keep going."

"Sometimes it's not always easy, but you know it's the right thing to do."