

The Modesto Bee

 [Print This Article](#)

Posted on Sun, Nov. 25, 2007

West side supporter walks the walk a lot

last updated: November 25, 2007 02:49:38 AM

One day this past summer, Barbara Ann Schmal confronted husband Bob with the question that can send chills down any man's spine.

"Where have you been?" she probed.

"What do you mean?" he replied, feigning innocence.

"Where have you been?" she repeated.

It was no use. After 40 years of marriage, he had zero chance of fooling her. She had caught him. He caved.

He had been at a meeting for the Weed & Seed program, he confessed. OK, probably three or four meetings that day, from any one of the six civic committees on which he serves. In fact, he'd attended 18 meetings "the week that she caught me," Schmal said.

This wasn't exactly what the doctor ordered so soon after amputating his left leg below the knee because of diabetes-related complications.

"I was afraid for him." Barbara Ann said. "I didn't want him to fall. He'd taken several falls here. Bobby would never tell you if he was hurt."

He lost the leg in February. He got his first prosthesis just two weeks ago and is learning to walk again. Yet, there he was, using his wheelchair to get to his car, loading the chair into the car and then using a walker to get back to the driver's side door to drive himself to the next meeting.

"Trying to get Bob to stop? Good luck," said Wayne Bridegroom, Schmal's next-door neighbor and pastor of Central Baptist Church a few blocks away.

Nothing -- not even losing part of a leg -- could keep Schmal from continuing his quest to make Modesto and particularly west Modesto a better place for all.

"He is a true believer in making a difference," said Cindy Rhea, Weed & Seed coordinator for the Modesto Police Department. "To restore a community, you need someone like him."

The federally funded program is aimed at ridding high-crime areas of criminals, drug users and blighted areas of garbage and health hazards.

These kinds of programs are only as good as the people who direct them. Before Modesto and Stanislaus County received the grant, the area of town south of Paradise Road generated more than 60 percent of all the calls for police service in the city. Since the program began in 2005, crime rates have dropped each year in six of the 10 crime categories ranging from graffiti to murder.

It's still a high-crime area, but people are starting to make a dent.

Since moving to Modesto from Fresno in 1996, Bob and Barbara Ann have lived in an area of town dominated for decades by gangs and drugs. They've chosen to stay to help reclaim the neighborhood from some of the town's seedier elements when others might have moved to another, safer part of town.

Some folks demand results -- from everyone else. Schmal digs in and gets involved. In the past, he's served on as many as eight or nine civic committees at the same time, using his smarts and wit to make progress.

"Bob has a way of making his point without offending everybody," said Modesto Police Chief Roy Wasden, who co-chairs the Weed & Seed effort alongside Sheriff Adam Christianson. Schmal is the organization's vice chairman.

"He's certainly not going to cut you any slack," Wasden said. "It's just that all of his energy gets pointed at the problem. He has a jovial, good-natured approach even when it's a difficult situation. He never alienates, and it's always for the good of the community."

There are never any quick fixes when it comes to neighborhood rescue. Weed & Seed will soon enter the third year of a five-year grant. Progress often is measured in little victories and successes. Schmal said it takes a certain perseverance that comes from hailing from Chicago and being a lifelong Cubs fan.

"We've had a bad century," he said, referring to a team that hasn't won a World Series since 1908. "It teaches you to be patient."

He grew up in the same part of Chicago that produced two Modesto mayors: Carol Whiteside and Carmen Sabatino.

Schmal joined the Army out of high school and was sent to cryptography (coding/decoding) school, expensive at the time at \$1,000 per student.

"Then they sent me to Europe, and in 31 months and three Christmases in Europe, I never spent one day doing cryptography in my life," he said.

Instead, he was assigned to security and intelligence as the Cold War heated up in 1962.

"I got to see live (nuclear) stuff in Berlin during the Cuban Missile Crisis," Schmal said. He was there when Soviet and American tanks came face to face at Checkpoint Charlie. No one breathed easier than Schmal and other Americans in West Berlin when the Soviets recalled their Cuba-bound ships in the Atlantic to avert the crisis.

"Our plan was that we would launch a limited nuclear strike to hold the Eastern Bloc back," Schmal said. "I've always wondered how the Russians would understand we were launching a 'limited' nuclear strike to hold them off until we could get a regular army over there."

A sergeant by age 20, he left the military after a three-year hitch and returned to Chicago, where he went to work for the Ford Motor Company.

An offer to transfer to Ford's San Jose plant in 1966 became far more attractive when he was driving to work in Chicago early one frigid Midwest morning.

"I hit black ice and spun a 360 on the highway," Schmal said. "I decided right then, 'I'm going west.' I'd had it with (the winters there)."

He left Ford after spending five years in San Jose, moved to Fresno to go back to school and to be closer to other family members who had come to the valley. They raised their three children in Fresno, where Schmal's 88-year-old mother still lives. Brother Terry Schmal lives in Kingsburg.

Bob Schmal worked for Sears for the next two decades before retiring in the early 1990s.

In 1996, a friend asked Bob and Barbara Ann to come to Modesto to manage west Modesto's Sutter Village apartment complex. The owner explained that the place had a few issues.

"There were 44 apartments but over 100 children," Schmal said. "Most of them were Southeast Asians."

The children struggled in school because many of their parents spoke no English.

"We fell in love with the kids and we felt like we might be able to do some good," he said. "We asked for kids to bring us their report cards. The older kids set up the playground like a second school."

The extra help enabled many of the children to improve their reading and language skills.

"We also started talking to (residents) about things like 'we' and 'us' instead of 'me' versus 'you,' " he said. "That led us to the Harvest of Hope."

Working with Bridegroom at Central Baptist, they created an exchange of donated goods and services for the poor. Beginning in 1999, it lasted about four years until funding problems shut it down, Schmal said. But the politics of the poor propelled Schmal and others to press the city and county for sewers and lighting districts in the west Modesto neighborhoods.

That morphed into his role with the Weed & Seed program, of which he's extremely proud and eternally optimistic. It goes beyond simply cleaning up the garbage and running out some drug dealers and other criminals, he said. It's also investing in the kids through the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and other activities. He helped secure grants to buy tickets to take kids to their first Modesto Nuts game.

"There have to be opportunities for kids who traditionally would just follow other kids into gangs," Schmal said. "We have second- and third-generation gangbangers. That's the cycle that's got to end. You look at the neighborhood and say, 'Why does it have to be this way?' If we can blaze a few new trails with the power of the federal government and the county and the city, why not?"

And what's going to stop him?

Certainly not the loss of a leg -- not as long as there's another meeting to attend, a strategy to develop and a problem to solve.

Nor will his wife stand in his way.

"It's a joy to have him out there in the community," Barbara Ann said. "It keeps his mind busy. It keeps him busy."

Where was he that summer day? She knew the answer before she posed the question.

Jeff Jardine's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in Local News. He can be reached at jjardine@modbee.com or 578-2383.