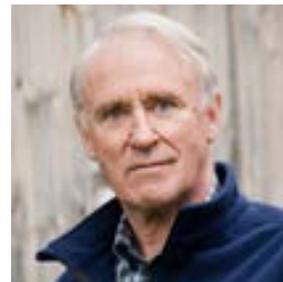


# The Power and Purpose of Informal Community Leaders



by Anne Colby  
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## About the Pathways to Encore Purpose Project

The Stanford University-led study described in this report is part of a collaboration between researchers at the Stanford Center on Adolescence at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education and Encore.org. The project has two interconnected aims: to better understand the nature and determinants of purposeful living in the “encore” (post-midlife) years and to use those insights to enable organizations to improve the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of programs that support purposeful aging in widely diverse segments of the population.

The project begins from the assumption that during the productive, active years beyond midlife — the encore years — individuals have the potential to adapt, renew or create lives in which their well-being is grounded in pursuits that are highly meaningful to them while also contributing to the well-being of others, their communities and the wider world.

This study, Purpose in the Encore Years, aims to better understand the nature and implications of purpose for those in their encore years. With a more complete picture of the diversity of encore-stage adults, the authors hope that professionals and organizations will be better able to serve and engage this population.

## About the Stanford Center on Adolescence, Stanford University Graduate School of Education

The Stanford Center on Adolescence (COA) is a scholarly research center that aims to promote the well-being of young people growing up in today's world and to illuminate the lifespan development of qualities, such as purpose, that emerge early in life and continue to evolve throughout adulthood. The COA pursues its mission through scholarly research that can provide information and guidance for parenting, educational practice, and vocational training. A primary focus for the COA is the development of purpose during adolescence and beyond.

## About Encore.org

Encore.org is an innovation hub that taps the talent of the 50+ population as a force for good.

## Acknowledgements

The members of the research team are grateful for the time given to this project by our participants, without whom we could never have done the research. We would like to especially thank those participants who took part in the interviews and opened up their worlds to us.

*Our deepest appreciation goes to the John Templeton Foundation for providing grant support to Stanford University for the Pathways to Encore Purpose project.*

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## OVERVIEW

In 2017, when Encore and researchers from the Stanford Graduate School of Education were beginning the Pathways to Encore Purpose project, Anne Colby, a psychologist at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education who has studied purpose across the life cycle, interviewed Hanmin Liu, co-founder of Wildflowers Institute, who made connections to informal elder leaders from three diverse Bay Area communities. “The Power and Purpose of Informal Community Leaders,” tells the stories of these community leaders and illustrates how each exemplifies purpose beyond the self, reveals the joy they gain from this work for the common good, and shows how the commitments of individuals can help create shared collective purpose in their communities.

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In several reports for Encore.org and in other publications, we have described our national study of purpose beyond the self in women and men over age 50. We define purpose as *a sustained commitment to goals that are meaningful to the self and that also contribute in some way to the common good*, to something larger than or beyond the self. The study has shown that a significant share (31%) of adults aged 50-92 meet the high bar for purpose our definition sets and these purposeful individuals come from all demographic groups and all ages. Just as research with younger people has shown, we found that purpose is associated with many positive psychological outcomes, making a powerful contribution to individuals’ well-being. This is an important reason to foster purpose in people of all ages, including older adults. But it is not the only reason. Committed, sustained engagement with activities that contribute to the common good is also essential for the health of our communities and the world more generally. It is these dual benefits, for individuals and for the world, that make supporting purpose in later life such an urgent priority.

A strength of our national study of purpose in older adults is its large representative sample, made up of 1200 respondents from all social categories and all parts of the United States. But this kind of sampling does not allow us to look closely at how purposeful individuals fit into their own particular communities and what roles they play in those communities. We are fortunate to have had the opportunity to enrich our national study by interviewing some extraordinary individuals in three very different communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. These people were not chosen with our concept of purpose in mind. Instead, they were identified by a non-profit organization called Wildflowers Institute as exceptional informal leaders who, in various ways, weave the social fabric that’s essential to the flourishing of their communities. This independently-selected supplemental sample provides cross-validation for the account of purposeful older adults generated by our national study.

Wildflowers Institute is led by founders Hanmin Liu and Jennifer Mei, who have been widely recognized for their innovative work in mapping the dynamics of communities in order to help those communities build on their naturally occurring assets. The Institute's mission is to support and strengthen the informal ways that some communities facing challenges solve their problems, sustain their cultures, and strengthen their institutions. (See [“Sustaining Change in a Market Economy: Community, Creativity and Transformation.”](#)) The process involves, first, identifying informal leaders who are widely trusted and known to work tirelessly on behalf of others and then collaborating with those leaders to learn how NGO's, philanthropists and other potential investors can best contribute to sustaining and strengthening the community's culture, values, institutions, and other assets. The goal of the Wildflowers Institute is not so much to develop individuals' leadership capacity but rather to identify those informal leaders who already exist in communities and develop community-wide events for insiders and outsiders that shine a light on those informal leaders' projects. Wildflowers' fellowship program brings together informal (and a few formal) leaders from the communities that the Institute works with. The purpose is to enable fellows and Wildflowers staff to learn from one another about how different communities work.

The informal leaders that connect communities with the Institute include many elders, who serve a variety of roles — mediating disputes, serving as liaisons with police and others outside the community, building community centers and other institutions, and maintaining the community's traditional culture through festivals, the arts, and other events. The dense networks that result from these activities have many positive effects, including lower crime rates, more positive youth development, economic vitality, and so on. The Wildflowers process sets a high priority on identifying and supporting authentic local leaders in ways that won't undermine their power or their motivation to help others, as external intervention often does. In Liu's view, the informal leaders his organization works with are driven by “a spirit of goodness” and see the rewards of their work not in terms of their own personal gain but in terms of their impact on their communities and the people of those communities. Their activities create social spaces and traditions that bring people together in a shared effort to sustain what's best in their cultures. Wildflowers works with various communities of refugees and other immigrants to the US and with some Native American tribes as well as other low-income communities.

**Informal leaders are driven by a ‘spirit of goodness’ and see the rewards of their work not in terms of their own personal gain but in terms of their impact on their communities.**

Liu doesn't use the language of purpose and doesn't select leaders to work with Wildflowers on the basis of their purpose as we define it. But his published descriptions of the leaders his programs has identified led us to believe they would meet the criteria we use to identify people of exceptional purpose, those we call purpose exemplars. As a way to broaden our understanding of how purposeful commitments play out in diverse communities, we interviewed a small group of these leaders from the San Francisco Bay Area as a supplement to our national sample. They include three from a Laotian refugee community in Oakland, CA; two from an Ethiopian immigrant community located in San Jose; and two from San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, which is racially diverse and very low income.

The life stories of these seven individuals vary a great deal, but all have faced hardships. Those hardships range from the horrors of war in Laos, political oppression and other difficulties in Ethiopia, and racial discrimination and poverty among those residing in the Tenderloin. The ages of the seven range from the early 50s to early 70s, and several indicated that they had faced significant health challenges. As we had expected, each of the Wildflowers leaders clearly exemplifies purpose beyond the self, and together they illustrate our previously reported finding that poverty, ill health, cultural dislocation, and other forms of adversity need not prevent lives of purpose, meaning, and social contribution. Like the most highly purposeful individuals in our national sample, all seven of the Wildflowers leaders expressed a sense of positivity, gratitude, and resilience connected with their community work. All described the imaginative approaches they took to creating unity, passing on cultural knowledge and values to young people, keeping cultural traditions alive, and advocating for (or creating) the things their communities need. All stressed that their engagements are intrinsically rewarding and that helping or giving back had become an important part of who they are.



Soccer coaches summarize the game to young girls and boys from Ethiopian community.

*Photo credit: Wildflowers Institute*

## Spotlight on Informal Community Leaders

### The San Francisco Tenderloin: Sharen Hewitt and Kathrine Wolfe

On February 22, 2018, a local San Francisco newspaper headlined a story, “Sharen Hewitt, force of nature and grandmother to hundreds of activists, is dead.” Fortunately for us, we had the opportunity to interview Sharen a year or so before she died. Hewitt was an African-American woman who was in her early 70s when we met, had a distinguished history of activism and professional work toward social justice. The child of a young single mother, Sharen had a challenging early life but when she tells her story she focuses on the richness of learning opportunities it gave her. For much of the time, she was cared for by her maternal grandmother, who had little formal education but was “the smartest, wisest, most profound person I’d ever met.” When we talked with her, Sharen described how exciting it was to come of age during the politically volatile era of the 1960s: “It was an amazing time. I think it was the best time ever, and I’m continuing to reap the benefit of that early exposure.” Hewitt pursued her vision of a better society in many different ways across the course of her life. She worked on housing policy, social service, community development, and by connecting directly with individuals who need help – “trying to find opportunities each day that advance our humanity.” In later life, she became a revered elder in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. In that capacity, she reached out to young people with an inspiring message of love. She understood the neighborhood as just one setting for her work, which extended well beyond the Tenderloin to humanity more broadly:

So, my work is not [just] Tenderloin, it is population-based, so it has to do with poor people, it has to do with people who’ve been marginalized... I’m a black woman, but I’m a citizen of humanity. ... I am a product of the continuity of all the love that’s ever gone before me ... Being a product of that I also have a responsibility to that love. I have a responsibility, nothing but love. ... I think it’s necessary for people to validate this extraordinary gift called life, and to feel like there’s, to the greatest degree possible, that ... we don’t leave things unfulfilled. For me, [this means] to demonstrate a purpose, to continue to challenge myself in looking for, not only structural long-term, but immediacy of impact. Today my life means something in this way differently than it did yesterday. ... It took me so long and everybody said, “Love is this, love.” That’s it, that’s it. That’s it.

As she entered her 70s, Sharen Hewitt was facing significant health and financial challenges but, despite those problems, her demeanor and message conveyed a powerfully positive spirit and gratitude for the very special life she had lived.

Kathrine Wolfe is another resident of San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. A white woman with an adult daughter and an adult son, Kathrine has had a difficult life. For years, she struggled with homelessness, mental and physical health problems, and family challenges. Yet, as she began to engage with other Tenderloin residents and then deepened her involvement as a community leader, the benefits in resilience and well-being she experienced were dramatic. Kathrine’s deepening commitments to others have brought her from isolation and hopelessness to a sense of her own strength and a life-affirming sense of belonging. From her own experience, Wolfe understands how important it is for all people, no matter what they’re struggling with, to be treated with dignity and respect, and she brings that awareness to her encounters with the neighborhood’s

most vulnerable residents: “There’s some people that might be schizophrenic, might act or talk in that manner, but I approach them and I do one-on-one and encourage them and get to know them and let them know that their voice matters. And you see them start coming out and they start getting excited and they want to know what the association is doing, ...and some of them are willing to step up to the plate and be volunteers at some of our activities... It gives them hope.”

Kathrine also draws on her experience of poverty in her work with the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation pressing for more affordable housing and working to provide better access to food: “Every opportunity I get, I go and speak on affordable housing and the need for it, and try to encourage the planning commission and the city government to really up how many affordable housing units are being built.... Just from that to food justice to anything that the community wants... we’re invited to the table to meet with developers and say, ‘Well, this is what the community would like to see. These are what people would like to see.’” Central to her efforts is her recognition of the power of shared voice and action: “If I were to just go and speak, yeah, I might have a voice, but when you have a collective group that shares similar things and similar desires, then your voice is heard louder.” In recent years, Kathrine has focused more on what she can accomplish than how she herself feels. Yet the results include benefits to her own resilience and well-being along with benefits to the community. She draws on humor and human connection showing people who are suffering that “there is life even after trauma.”

### **Laotian Community, San Francisco area: Grand Priest Fouvang Tang and Kouichoy Saechao**

Unlike most others in the Wildflowers group, Grand Priest Fouvang Tang holds a formal leadership role in his community. His position as grand priest of the Lu Mien people from the Laotian hill country is hereditary, with his father and grandfather preceding him in the role. As the highly esteemed leader of his widely scattered tribe, the Grand Priest has disciples not only in the US but also many who are still in Laos and in Thailand, France, and other countries. Yet, despite his exalted status, his life and work are grounded in regard for the collective. As he put it: “I’m in the community, a member, so we try to help or to be what we can and it’s a collective effort. If there’s things that we need to do, [if we can do] something together, the better we can help you.”

Grand Priest Fouvang acts as a linchpin of efforts to create a strong interdependent community by providing spiritual guidance and leadership. This has not been easy. When members of the Laotian hill tribes began immigrating to the US in large numbers due to the war in Vietnam, they experienced language barriers, the loss of their largely agricultural way of life, and other aspects of deep culture shock, including gang violence, family conflict, and clashes with local police. As the traditional village social networks broke down in the new environment, efforts to rebuild social cohesion were impeded by tensions among conflicting spiritual traditions within the group, primarily between those who maintain ancient traditions of worship connected with the tribes’ mythical forefather King Pan and those whose primary spiritual identification is with Buddhism. An exceptionally creative leader, Grand Priest Fouvang Tang worked with key informal community leaders to create the King Pan Buddha Light Palace Temple and, in its opening ceremony, drew the conflicting spiritual traditions together through a program of chants and prayers that recognized both. In further work to weave together these sometimes conflicting threads, the Grand Priest and others created new spiritual ceremonies, including events in which the whole clan comes together in the home of a family experiencing difficulty to support the family involved.

The Grand Priest and other community leaders not only work to support the tribes' adaptation to their new home but also the Grand Priest Fouvang himself is especially concerned to pass on the traditions surrounding the preparation and use of herbal medicines, which is an ancient heritage passed down for many generations already. "In old days from generation to generation about the herbal medicine, how to mix them, how to identify them as a good medication and to help a certain illness. If that is not helping, then something how we can perform a ceremony for healing. So we would like the younger generation to learn to know about a way of how we can help each other... so it's how do we satisfy the spiritual side too with helping that individual." The deep value of people taking physical, financial, and spiritual responsibility for each other and pooling their resources to make sure everyone is cared for goes back many generations as well. This was the way in the villages of Laos and a cherished commitment now that some have created new "villages" in the US.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his celebrity, Grand Priest Fouvang conveys a sense of humility, denying that his own wisdom is special by acknowledging that people have myriad different ways of contributing. He values his followers not because they glorify him but because they assure him that the old ways can continue even after he's gone. In the end, the Grand Priest gains the same satisfaction and joy in transcending the self that we see in all our exemplars of purpose. He says simply, "I feel satisfied, I feel happy."

## **He values his followers not because they glorify him but because they assure him that the old ways can continue even after he's gone.**

Another key figure in rebuilding the Lu Mien community in the San Francisco Bay area is Kouichoy Saechao. Saechao was still working as a social service provider when we talked with him but, despite the demands of his work, he found time to play a central role in the establishment of the temple and community center. Kouichoy thinks strategically about what he's trying to accomplish, taking account of the community's challenges, assets, and institutions. Many of the challenges that concern him stem from the difficulty of maintaining a traditional culture within the larger, very different culture of the US more broadly. Kouichoy is committed to preserving Lu Mien traditions, including its values of social solidarity and trust, respect – especially for elders in the community, a sense of shared responsibility, and the Mien language. The community center and temple Kouichoy was instrumental in creating provide crucial "physical, social, and spiritual spaces" that constitute the heart of the community. Kouichoy's wife, Chaylium Saechao, led the effort to organize women and the community to support the development of those spaces and events in the spaces. Both continue to work long hours to ensure that the annual King Pan festival is successful, aware of the festival's power to bring people together, strengthening human and spiritual connections. Festivals like this provide what are now rare opportunities for community members to "dress up in their own costumes, speak their own language... dance, and share the [traditional] food."

As the beloved youngest in a family with 12 children, Kouichoy's wife, Chaylium Saechao, sees herself as an especially happy person. From the outside, it would seem that her life has been hard, but through the habitual practice of gratitude and compassion, she knows how to create happiness for

herself and others. As a girl in Laos, Chaylium and her family endured the atrocities of the Vietnam War: “They trying to kill your relatives, kill the innocent kids ... the gun fires, the bombs and everything, the fires....I lost my brother in the camp, I lost my sister [and she] have two daughters lost, and her husband they killed, the five-year-old kid, seven-year-old kid, my nieces. I say, ‘Oh my God. I used to babysit those kids and it’s so difficult.’ Many people drowned in the Mekong River crossing, the rowboat. They just drown with children and families and everyone crying. Oh my goodness. It’s horrible like a movie but it’s real life. ... They’re spraying the chemicals and everything, and we were so young.”

When they arrived in California, Chaylium and the other refugees spoke no English and many could not read or write. Even as she was learning to get along herself, she began teaching others. Then she began to search for space that would allow the newly arrived elders, who had been farmers, to plant gardens, as a way to help them feel at home.

As her English developed, Chaylium became a translator in schools and hospitals, bringing her remarkable generosity and kindness to a job she loves. Although she’s still working, Chaylium finds time to help care for her 6 grandchildren and work with others to raise money for scholarships, organize festivals and other activities in the local temple, and create ways to keep the Mien language alive.

Chaylium recently emerged from a serious bout with cancer accompanied by chemotherapy and a long stretch of rehabilitation. During the ordeal, people in the clinic used to say, “Oh look, the happy person coming.” In her view, the capacity to remain strong and positive comes from her gratitude for having survived the war and for the life she and her family built in the US: “I tell everybody when I see people down, I said, ‘Come on, cheer up. This is nothing, nothing. We can help you.’” She sees herself as lucky as well as spiritually strong: “I have everything that in this country they call American dream. ... This country, if you know how to live, it feels like heaven.”

### **Ethiopian immigrant community, San Jose, CA: Semunesh Arega and Maaza Essayas**

As a young woman, Semunesh Arega was granted political asylum in the US after running afoul of the political bosses in Ethiopia by engaging in a public conversation with former US secretary of state and UN ambassador Madeleine Albright. By that time, many of Semunesh’s friends had already left the country or were in prison. She knew that her home wasn’t safe, and it was time to leave. Already, while she was still in Ethiopia, Semunesh was engaged in helping people in need. “It has always been natural for me to give back.... Sometimes you’re just born for that, I think.”

Since coming to the US, her focus has shifted, but her commitment is stronger than ever. A “strong Christian,” Semunesh has found many ways to contribute within and beyond her immigrant community. Having earned a master’s degree before she left Ethiopia, she has worked for the Santa Clara Mental Health Department Ethnic and Cultural Community Advisory Committee and as a “para-educator” in programs for special needs students. She loves the work and takes it “as a mission, not as a job only.” In addition to her paid work, Semunesh has been

a leader in her community. She helped start a Sunday school for children in her church. She co-founded and runs a weekend school for diaspora children designed to preserve their native Ethiopian language, culture, history, and values. She believes that helping young people to maintain connections with their cultural roots gives them a stronger sense of identity that will provide resilience as they engage with their new country and culture. Core to the Ethiopian values she cherishes are solidarity and shared responsibility for community members' well-being. She helps keep this tradition alive by leading a monthly gathering that reaches out to community members, especially older women, who can be especially isolated and lonely, having arrived in the US late in life.

**Helping young people to maintain connections with their cultural roots gives them a stronger sense of identity that will provide resilience as they engage with their new country and culture.**

Like Kouichoy said of Laotian refugees, Semunesh feels that an exclusive focus on adapting to the new culture, without maintaining the old, results in “emptiness and loneliness.” At the same time, she has a special appreciation for her new country, having fled Ethiopia in a time of political oppression: “Oh my god, it just drives me crazy when I think of my country!” This frustration has given her a real love for democracy and human rights and the US constitution.



Young boy learning from Lu Mein grand priest and shamans.

*Photo credit: Wildflowers Institute*

Although Maaza Essayas works full time in the Silicon Valley tech sector, she is also deeply engaged with volunteer work in her community. This began when she was raising her son, who was born after she came to the US and is now in his mid-twenties. She taught him her native language at home and took him to community cultural events as a way to keep him involved with Ethiopian culture. Although the local community is a large one, Maaza was heartbroken to see that many of these events were dimly attended, as she put it. She felt the event organizers must be ineffective so she began to offer suggestions: you need to advertise more, and so on. “And then finally it dawned on me -- ‘I can’t just be telling them what to do, I need to do something about it,’ right? So then I said, ‘Okay, I’ll volunteer helping you organize the [Ethiopian] New Year’s event.’ So that’s how I got involved.” Since that time, her contributions have multiplied, addressing problems back in Ethiopia as well as here: “Since it’s kind of well-known that I am drawn to that, I get asked a lot.”

Most recently, Maaza has become very involved with an Ethiopian arts organization that supports established artists and mentors the up-and-coming. The group, which supports Ethiopian music, drama, visual arts, poetry, and other literature, is compelling to Maaza in part because she believes it can help bridge the ethnic, religious, and political divides that prevent diverse people inside Ethiopia and in its diaspora from coming together. But, despite her worries about these deep-seated divisions, Maaza sees reason to hope and is especially excited by signs of cultural connection in the next generation, such as a thriving Young Ethiopian-American Professionals group.

Maaza is still young, and retirement is still at least 10 years off for her. But she already knows what she’ll do when she eventually leaves her day job. Her community work is her true passion: “Where I draw my meaning in life is working with people and making a difference in whatever small way, and that’s where I feel alive.” The attendance at community events still doesn’t meet Maaza’s high standards, “But whoever comes appreciates it; they take so much out of it, it just energizes me. And, right then and there, I start thinking about, ‘Okay, what will be my next event?’ So, it’s kind of a cycle.... Self-reinforcing. It just energizes me... keeps me going. I’ll be working on this until the very end!”