

Staff Spotlight: Barbara Meister

You may not know the name Barbara Meister, but you definitely feel her impact. Barbara is the Public Affairs Director here at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. In her words, she “manages all of our external relationships” which includes the government, the hospitality industry, and the greater community. She works with the city of Monterey and Pacific Grove, our hotel partners, neighbors, and more to build community and support the mission of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.



Barbara is not a native Californian, she was born and raised on a farm in Nebraska. She started in food policy, and then worked for a small sustainable agriculture consulting firm. She has also been a community organizer in the tri-county area addressing issues such as housing, public safety, immigration, and public education. “That is what most prepared me for this [her current] role, knowing the non-profit communities, the government agencies, and the elected officials.” It was the Aquarium’s reputation, and the position description that intrigued Barbara and ultimately brought her to us.

Barbara is not isolated in her role, she relies on both staff and volunteers to share her messages. One example of the impact you had on the community was Measure P, a tax Pacific Grove proposed in 2016. If approved, the Aquarium’s admission fees would have been taxed. By informing you, our dedicated volunteers, we were able to get our message out and the measure was defeated. By being a voice for the Aquarium in your communities, you help us achieve some amazing things. You can continue to help by learning about some of the large projects Barbara is working on; the 2020 Census, plastic pollution, and affordable housing. “The housing issue is related to our workforce, the plastics work is one of our strategic conservation goals, and the Census is about strengthening our community as a whole.”

Historically, both Monterey and Santa Cruz counties have been undercounted in the Census. This is a huge problem because the results of the Census help governments distribute funds for a variety of programs. This data is used to determine units of housing, the number of roads, parks, hospitals, and other services that benefit all of us. Getting folks to participate in the 2020 Census is not an easy task. “In Monterey County, because we have such a high poverty rate and we have a high percentage of people working without documentation, there is a high level of fear and anxiety about participating in the census.” There are safe guards in the census to protect these individuals and Barbara has been working with the Aquarium to get the word out. “We are asking them to overcome their fears and see the value and benefit of participation.” One way the Aquarium has helped spread the word was providing information to our visitors during Community Open House in December. Even now, you can assist by talking to your friends, neighbors, and greater community about the importance of this event.

The other two projects, affordable housing and plastics pollution, may not be as time sensitive but they are essential. The Aquarium has a goal of reducing single use plastic, we talk about this with visitors on the floor, and we walk the walk with our store and café. Barbara helps spread the word beyond our doors. “I have been working with the coalition of NGO’s including Surf Rider and Sustainable Monterey County, and we have been advocating at the city council meetings. Also we have been doing outreach to businesses to inform them and engage them in the process.” She is referring to the ordinances in Carmel, Monterey and Pacific Grove that ban single use plastics such as straws, utensils, and even dry cleaning bags (in Pacific Grove only). As members of these communities, you can use your voice and your dollar to support these ordinances and the businesses going above and beyond to reduce single use plastic. One of these places is DiMaggio’s dry cleaners on Central Ave, they switched to reusable garment bags before the Pacific Grove ordinances were created.

Lastly, Barbara works to create more affordable housing within Monterey County. Housing is a barrier to the workforce at the Aquarium on all levels. To help with this issue, Barbara attends city council meetings to speak on behalf of the Aquarium to support policies that make the construction of affordable housing easier. “There are new proposals making it easier to build accessory dwelling units, or what is known as granny units.” Policies such as this one allow us to think outside of the box. In a brainstorming session, Barbara questioned if “Aquarium volunteers who are home owners would find it compelling to build an accessory dwelling and house an aquarium employee as a tenant?” If this is something you are interested in having a conversation about, Barbara is all ears!

The 2020 Census, plastics pollution, and affordable housing are three projects that have the power to impact the community, and as volunteers you all have the ability to help. Thank businesses using compostable items or getting rid of plastics. Talk to your community about the importance of the census and be a voice for affordable housing. If you are interested in learning more about these projects or want to offer your help, please contact Barbara Meister directly. Her office number is 831-648-4978 and her email is bmeister@mbayaq.org.