



United Way of the Wine Country

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CONTACT:

Rusty Smith, United Way of the Wine Country
Phone 707-528-4485 ext. 112; FAX 707-528-2930
rusty.smith@unitedwaywinecountry.org; *website*: unitedwaywinecountry.org

Santa Rosa Woman Wins \$25,000 & Local Tax Filers Receive \$7.6 Million Through VITA

Santa Rosa, California, June 14, 2017 – United Way of the Wine Country would like to thank the 206 volunteers who helped individuals and families at 30 community tax sites file 5,600 tax returns for free through its IRS-certified Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Known locally as Earn It! Keep It! Save It! (EKS), the program saw an 11% increase over the previous tax year with tax clients receiving \$7.6 million in federal tax refunds. The free tax preparation program, supported in large part through an IRS grant and the County of Sonoma, is one of the many ways United Way is working to improve lives in our communities across Sonoma, Mendocino, Lake, Humboldt and Del Norte counties, helping families and individuals who are struggling to get by.

"I did a return for a client who was paid entirely in cash but brought in her bank statements to be a good citizen and pay her taxes," explains Stan Jaffe, EKS/VITA volunteer and Keysight Technologies employee. He continued, "After we were done, she shook my hand, and after pausing a moment, she hugged and thanked me. Thank you for the opportunity to help people like that."

This tax season, a very fortunate Santa Rosa EKS client, Ivonne Sonato-Vega, received \$25,000 when she was selected as the national Grand Prize Photo Contest winner of the 2017 SaveYourRefund Promotion administered by Commonwealth and America Saves. Ivonne was presented the winning check on June 14 at a reception hosted and sponsored by Sonoma County Winegrowers. SaveYourRefund incentivizes savings at tax time by offering cash prizes for filers who save at least \$50 of their tax refund into a qualified savings product. In 2017, over 2,800 tax filers entered SaveYourRefund and saved nearly \$2.5 million. Of those filers, more than 350 contributed submissions to the Grand Prize Contest which asked them to share their motivations for savings through a captioned photograph.

Upon receiving her grand prize, Ivonne stated, "United Way inspired me to enter the contest and tell my personal savings story about why I needed to save money and what mattered to me in my life. I guess it's easy to think your story is not harder or any different from others. They really made me feel like my story was a story of persistence and determination." In describing how she plans to use her winnings, the mother of three girls explained, "Thanks to United Way, Commonwealth, and America Saves, I am able to pursue my dreams to become a NICU nurse and help other families who are in the same situation I was with my premature daughters. It also gives me the ability to save up even more for a down payment for a house."

Volunteers aided in bringing back more than \$2.6 million through the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) alone, and helped clients save over \$150,000 in preparation fees. Both the Federal and the California EITC (CalEITC) are aimed at helping low income working families and individuals climb out of poverty and create more financial stability in their lives.

One tax filer commented on looking forward to filing her annual return, "As a full-time employee and full-time college student, I look forward to tax season or 'relief season' as I like to call it." In referring to the benefits of CalEITC, she continued, "This year, I was given an additional amount from the State of



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California. Normally, I receive under \$100 and this year my state refund was nearly \$600.” Almost 71% of the clients served said they would use their refunds to pay off existing debt and/or bolster their savings.

Mike Kallhoff, United Way of the Wine Country President and CEO, stated, “It is exciting to see the EKS program continue to expand each year in order to help more local individuals and families receive much needed tax refunds and credits to help make ends meet.” In response to the Santa Rosa winner of SaveYourRefund, Mike explained, “We encourage tax filers to save a portion of their refund, and seeing Ivonne receive the big grand prize by doing just that helps to show others why increasing savings can reap huge long-term rewards.”

United Way is working to advance the common good by focusing on financial stability, education, and health. These are the building blocks for a good life - a quality education that leads to a stable job, enough income to support a family through retirement, and good health. United Way's goal is to invest in improving lives in their five county region by creating long-lasting changes preventing problems from happening in the first place.

Contact Suzanne Yeomans at 707-528-4485 ext. 108 to partner with United Way of the Wine Country’s EKS initiative. Please visit unitedwaywinecountry.org to learn more or to make an investment in your community through United Way.

About United Way of the Wine Country

United Way of the Wine Country (UWWC) works to advance the common good along the North Coast of California in Sonoma, Mendocino, Lake, Del Norte and Humboldt Counties. UWWC mobilizes the caring power of communities to focus on the building blocks of a good life - education, financial stability, and health. We do this by addressing underlying issues, improving lives, and building a healthy vibrant community. Visit unitedwaywinecountry.org for more information.

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