

A fresh voice...

# Sue Densmore's Commitment to a Healthy and Happy Jackson County

BY JENNIFER STRANGE  
PHOTOGRAPHY / DREW FLEMING

COMMUNITY LEADER SUE DENSMORE HAS BEEN WORKING for the people of Jackson County since she left advertising in 1990 for a career in community and business development. As general manager of Rogue Waste Systems, Sue helped develop a groundbreaking recycling and landfill solution to the valley's waste issues. Then she started Sue Densmore Communication Strategies, a Medford business that assists private and public companies define, refine and reach their goals through the creation of wide-reaching and effective communication networks.

Most recently, Sue put her skills and experience before voters as Democratic candidate for Jackson County Commissioner. After winning the primary, she was narrowly defeated in the general election. We recently asked Sue (who was visiting her youngest daughter in Los Angeles) how it feels to look back on the election and what she sees for her future.

## Question & Answer

**Q: Thanks for giving us some of your vacation time, Sue. First, tell us a little bit about your professional life; how did you become a communications' strategist?**

**A:** When I was in advertising, I found out that most people needed more than an ad—they often needed a reengineering of their business. Then I realized that I really enjoyed working with businesses that have a relationship with the government and helping communities that need long-term solutions to various problems.

**Q: What has this taught you about the human condition?**

**A:** Telling a community what's going to happen is a kind of solution that doesn't last. The one thing that we need to really pay attention to is that we need to listen. There is often no system of communication in place in any size of company, corporation or community. And it doesn't come naturally. There are so many opportunities to solve problems if we just listen and work together—even in diverse groups.

**Q: What inspired you to try your hand at politics?**

**A:** Both my father and grandfather were county commissioners in Lakeview, Oregon, where I was born and raised. It was a politi-



**"I've always been inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt and one of her quotes. I've got it on a cup: 'You should do the thing you think you cannot do.'" Sue Densmore, on one of the factors that motivated her to get involved in Jackson County politics**

cal family and ever since I was a little girl I was interested. As an adult, I've wanted to apply my professional skills to county politics—I've felt very confident about matching my skills to the office. The reason I waited to run for public office is that I have been a single mother for 19 years and wanted to be the best mother I could be. My daughters, Megan and Brooke, have now both moved away. Plus, I've always been inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt and one of her quotes. I've got it on a cup: "You should do the thing you think you cannot do." [Sue met Eleanor at The McCall's Congress of Better Living Conference when Sue was in the third grade.]



Sue Densmore with her autographed Eleanor Roosevelt photo

**Q: What was it like running a campaign?**

**A:** It was so intense—I don't think I've ever worked as hard on anything in my life. If you see a campaign from the eyes of the candidate, it's quite a thing. I was busy every minute, traveling all over the county and meeting people. In the morning I'd be in Evans Valley, then to a duck race in Shady Cove, maybe an event in a private home and a coffee with 10 people in another town. And there were television appearances and interviews and the large debates. Lots of parades. Then our team would go door-to-door three nights a week and on Saturdays. I tried to do as much of that as I could and I'd also stop by the phone banks four days a week. I was always on my way to somewhere. Basically, if somebody called and asked if I could be there, I tried to go. At first, my campaign staff would say, "You're doing what? When?" Finally, we got pretty good at a staff person going ahead to set things up and maybe drive me to the next place, so I could be working on speeches and other things. But very often the staff was busy and I'd be on my own at both ends of the county—from Eagle Point to the Applegate to Ashland in one day.

**Q: How did you feel when you were defeated?**

**A:** It was the first time I had run, so I was pretty much an unknown. I was gratified that I won the primary and disappointed that I didn't win the general. But I had a great team and we ran the kind of campaign I wanted to run. There were a lot of people who hadn't been involved in county politics before who got involved—they gave everything they could give. And I got almost 46,000 votes, so although I didn't win, I feel that shows a lot of people are interested in change and felt that we could work together. For that reason, it was a real personal victory for me.

**Q: How did you deal with the disappointment?**

**A:** You know, I'm still the same person I was on November 2nd. Although I'm not sworn in as County Commissioner, I'll still serve with the same values I've had for a lifetime. I love Jackson County, I raised my children here, it's my home.

**Q: Surely being in the public eye has changed some things?**

**A:** A lot more people recognize me now and they've been unbelievably thoughtful—have given me cakes, certificates for coffees, notes, cards. They've continued to thank me for running. Another nice thing is all the friends I've made. I met so many people all over the county and that opened a lot of doors. And my campaign

was run by a core group of seven to 10 of the brightest women I've ever known and we are now just really good friends.

**Q: What was one thing you learned during the campaign?**

**A:** Through a lot of very thoughtful discussion, I saw how diverse our county is. People differ on how they'd like to see growth issues develop in the future, but almost everyone, regardless of their political party, wants abundant clean water, clean air, access to open spaces, rivers and recreation and they also want good jobs. The discussion usually came down to: "Can we have all those things in Jackson County?"

**Q: What do you see from the new slate of officers?**

**A:** It's early to tell. I think that once the new officials take their places in January, that's the time we'll need to be ready to think about what's going to happen. We'll have new mayors in Medford and several communities and a new commissioner. There's a lot of change and, of course, nationally there are issues. I think there's a lot of confusion right now. People are just trying to sort it all out.

**Q: Will you stay involved in politics?**

**A:** Politics is an interesting ... well, let's just say it's interesting. I don't have any plans to run again at this time, but certainly I'll keep my options open. I really did enjoy it.

**Q: What's next on your horizon?**

**A:** First, I have to refocus on my business. I'm working on developing an endowment for Non-Profit Legal Services in Jackson County, which helps women who suffer from domestic violence. Mary Kay Cosmetics Company is very concerned about these women and is going to donate a percentage of sales to the cause—it's an example of the company, the salespeople and the customers all feeling like they can help. It's an education about finding a new way to develop resources. And, as an indirect continuation of the campaign, I've started something called [www.freshvoice.org](http://www.freshvoice.org). It's an online community forum to continue the wonderful dialogue that was started during the campaign; I will lightly moderate it, but it will have voices from all over. The name comes from the idea that my campaign was kind of a "fresh voice." I really do think there is interest in continuing to think toward the future. ♦