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Main Feature Story - Friday, June 15, 2012

Feature: And the environmentalists go marching on
The 'Forum' celebrates 40 years of educating Marin's environmental army...

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by Jason Walsh

"God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand tempests and floods. But he cannot save them from fools."—John Muir

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Fortunately, the man upstairs has had a little help these past 40 years from the Environmental Forum of Marin.

The year was 1972—the environmental movement was still in its infancy, and yet the little suburb of Marin had already emerged battered but unbroken from a decade of fighting against development plans for a cross-county superhighway, a high-rise lined city in the Headlands named Marincello, and a vacation playground for the rich and famous along Tomales Bay.

Marin's environmental community learned from an early age the importance of educating and persuading local officials and community members about the intrinsic values of open space, modest development, a clean and pure watershed and the protection of Marin's diverse ecosystems. But Marin's eco-visionaries also realized their victories over development did not exist in a vacuum—there would be more Marincellos to come if the stewards of the land let down their guard.

So a group of Marin's most tenacious enviros—led by Martin Griffin, Ellen Straus, Phyllis Faber, Nona Dennis and Kathy Cuneo, among others—established the Environmental Forum of Marin, an Audubon Canyon Ranch-supported collective founded as a breeding ground for tomorrow's environmental advocates—an army of Mother Nature's foot soldiers, if you will—sent forth from the Forum to defend Marin's fauna and flora from the unchecked human ecological footprints of decades to come.

As Griffin described at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Forum in 1993:

"[The purpose of the Environmental Forum was] to train a cadre of volunteers to be effective and influential workers and speakers in the field of environmental planning and quality.

"This was the first experiment of its kind in the U.S.," said Griffin. "It was an idea whose time had come."

Through "masters classes" led by experienced Forum instructors, trainees spend months in a series of lectures and field trips focused on the natural world, humankind's impact on the environment, advocacy training and completion of a stewardship project. According to the Marin County Board of Supervisors' recent resolution declaring June 16 "Environmental Forum of Marin Day," the program has graduated more than 1,000 environmentalists, and from their various stewardship projects has come the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, Safe and Healthy San Rafael and the Marin Open Garden Project. Graduates have gone on to serve in the United States Senate, the Marin County Board of Supervisors, numerous city and town councils, planning commissions and on the boards of such agencies as Audubon Canyon Ranch, the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, the Marin Conservation League, the Marin Municipal Water District, WildCare and more.

On June 16, Marty Griffin, Phyllis Faber, Kathy Cuneo and Nona Dennis will be honored at Audubon Canyon Ranch's "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," a celebration of the Environmental Forum of Marin's first 40 years.

We asked the "Forum Four" about their decades-long work with the EFM and the future of Marin's environmental movement.

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The Forum was in many ways launched as a recruiting ground for an infantry of Mother Nature's foot soldiers, whose purpose was to go forth in battle against anti-environmental forces—somewhat in the mold of cause-oriented political groups of the last century. Was this concept as revolutionary as it sounds?

Kathy Cuneo: I don't believe that at the time this sounded revolutionary, not compared to the winds that were blowing through the entire country. We had had the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement—and the environmental movement seemed to be a natural outgrowth of the general striving to "put things right."

Marty Griffin: To be specific, the Environmental Forum of Marin was founded by Audubon Canyon Ranch, a coalition of four National Audubon Society branches, in 1972—the year that two great national parks, the Point Reyes National Seashore and Golden Gate National Recreation Area, were established in West Marin after 10 years of vigorous opposition. Both parks partly surround or border ACR, whose large heronry stopped the coastal freeway. The initial purpose of EFM was to educate passionate citizens to vigilantly support and defend these two great parks, which transformed the future of Marin County. I like the concept that EFM is Mother Nature's foot soldiers for preventing the Los Angelization of Marin. Good work!

Phyllis Faber: The Environmental Forum was founded to provide an educational program illuminating countywide issues and the agencies affecting our daily lives. It grew out of a training program designed for Audubon Canyon Ranch, whose funding source had ended. The Environmental Forum program was created to attract this same funding source and its program was designed to provide basic knowledge of the county: Marin's natural world, its basic services such as water supply, water and garbage disposal, and county planning processes including zoning and transportation. Its goal was to enable members to consider environmental issues and become better-informed citizens, some even community leaders.

Nona Dennis: One has only to review the preceding decades of untrammled growth and environmental disasters, or near-disasters, to recognize the significance of the Forum's founding! Certainly environmental advocacy groups already existed—Sierra Club, Marin Audubon Society, Marin Conservation League, to name a few—but the idea of a systematic training program to enable citizens to speak knowledgeably to boards and commissions so as to influence public decisions could be considered revolutionary. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any other organizations that have followed that model. We now have many advocacy organizations focusing on the environment, but they don't offer such an educational opportunity.

Has there been a cause or issue that EFM championed that wasn't settled the way you'd have liked—a defeat that particularly sticks in your craw?

MG: For many years the EFM championed the national parks; in recent years EFM has quietly tolerated the undermining of the national parks system by Oystergate, and political foes of wilderness. PRNS has been targeted by powerful corporation lobbyists as a wedge to open millions of wilderness acres of BLM lands, national forests, national parks for commercial uses, such as fracking, oil,

hunting, power generation, roads.

KC: A great disappointment that I remember is the construction of Warm Springs Dam by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

PF: In the early days, the Forum sometimes took positions on political matters that dismayed other members. It was decided that the goal of the Forum was to inform members, not become an advocacy organization. This position has served the organization well as board members are often new to the Forum or deeply involved with other nonprofits and their personal agenda does not necessarily serve the entire Forum well. Individuals can and do advocate for various issues but they cannot claim their opinion as representing the Forum.

ND: I'm going to redirect the question and point out that over the years the Environmental Forum has experienced a tension between its educational function and its advocacy function as an *organization*. For many years the Forum did take positions in local environmental and land-use issues—often after heated internal debate! In the past dozen years, the focus has shifted entirely to education and away from engaging in local battles. This disappointed many "old timers" but it also has allowed the board to concentrate on the considerable effort of putting on two educational programs every year. Thus, *individuals* are trained to be articulate advocates, but they choose their own battles! The downside is that the Forum is not as well known to boards, councils and commissions in Marin as it might be if it were more directly engaged.

Marin is known for its commitment to environmentalism, yet also for its consumptive lifestyles and large ecological footprint. What do you think about this Jekyll and Hyde aspect of Marin?

ND: I am constantly dismayed by the huge gap between what Marin claims to be (environmentally progressive, "green," eco-conscious, etc.) and its ecological footprint, among the largest in the world. Affluence inevitably equates with consumption, so it is almost inevitable that the lifestyle of many Marinites, which typically includes large homes, multiple cars (even if one is a Prius), frequent flying and other advantages we take for granted, will consume resources far beyond what might be considered necessary. This is by no means true of all residents, but in the aggregate, we are poor role models for "sustainability"!

PF: The Jekyll and Hyde aspect of a consumptive lifestyle in a county that has cherished its open spaces has increasingly been a focus of Forum participants in recent years and they have become effective leaders in a number of areas in order to encourage Marin residents toward leading a less-consumptive and more green lifestyle. Reducing the county's waste stream and plastic bag usage have been major themes and programmatic successes for the Forum. Forum members commonly make significant changes in their personal and families' lives as they learn more of the issues and facts.

KC: It certainly is true that we do not live the life that we know to be best for the Earth. This is why we have to keep on talking to each other about lifestyle. We know that paraphrase of what (the comic strip character) Pogo said, "We has met the enemy and them is us." Because we can afford to live very well we are the greatest threat to the planet because our affluence allows us to over-consume.

MG: The two national parks and a political revolution stabilized Marin's population growth, yet diminished the middle class, and has attracted a wealthy, well-educated population, while increasing its ecological footprint. EFM must help educate these newcomers to reduce their consumptive lifestyles, and to protect and cherish the magnificent landscapes, open spaces, ag lands, parks, bays and ridgetops handed us on a silver platter.

Name a historic figure who inspired you to become a steward of the land.

PF: There are a number of historic figures that have influenced and guided me. Two of the earliest were Aldo Leopold, who wrote so compellingly about a land ethic; that has been a guiding light for me since I read and reread his views 40 years ago. John Teal wrote a book, *Life and Death of a Salt Marsh*, in the 1960s that gave me an insight into this fascinating and critical habitat and his insights have guided a lot of my life work in salt marshes. Marty Rosen and Doug Ferguson from the Trust for Public Land have been giants in the world of land conservation, particularly urban parks.

MG: I am a disciple of John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt and Congressman William Kent, who gave us Muir Woods and the Marin Municipal Water District wild lands, and started the move to save all of Mt. Tamalpais and West Marin. Also, I was inspired and trained by Caroline Livermore of Ross, who recognized the population growth dangers of the Golden Gate Bridge, and started the Marin Conservation League, countywide planning and saved Richardson Bay.

ND: There is no question in my mind as to the main influences in my becoming so committed to the land: With my discovery of Charles Darwin in the late 1960s, I found a scientific basis for my worldview, but it is the simple *land ethic* of Aldo Leopold, discovered about the same time, that has stayed with me. I re-read parts of *Sand County Almanac* whenever I want reassurance that I am "on track" on a particular issue. He was far ahead of his time, but timeless in his definition of ethics and the expanded "community," in which humans should be ordinary citizens, not conquerors.

KC: The only historic figure that I can think of who has inspired me to become a better steward of the land is John Muir. The person who actually inspired me to understand nature and our relationship to it is Remmy Kingsley [who established the Forum's inaugural educational program]. We were a group of biologists who met at San Francisco State University as part-time teachers and we called ourselves Natural Science Education Resources. Remmy was the one who was our leader and who framed the design for the Forum.

What is the Forum's ultimate legacy?

ND: I prefer to see the legacy as ongoing rather than ultimate. I think of the Forum as a kind of *diaspora*—that is, each class of graduating trainees has dispersed in many directions and made a difference to the environment. Barbara Boxer is only one of many examples, probably the most renowned. Other examples could be cited of Forum graduates who have formed new organizations, become planning commissioners or other public officials, become champions of causes, or gone back to their professions or other activities with fresh ideas about how to save the environment. A second legacy could be the supportive network of social connections to which each class has contributed. Some graduates have continued to communicate with each other for years after "bonding" in their class. As the Forum goes into its next decade, that network will only grow.

KC: Our legacy has to be the people who have taken the program and are "walking the walk."

MG: EFM's legacy is to ensure that the 85 percent of Marin public lands continue to be protected from development in perpetuity. Secondly, EFM must generate respect for the policies and personnel of our great national parks and monument, which made possible the magnificent Marin that we have today.

PF: One legacy I hope will be to call the organization the Forum, and not EFM, which is meaningless. The word "Forum" was chosen with care to reflect a marketplace for ideas. I hope a lasting Forum legacy will be to continue developing a cadre of environmentally educated citizens who will make our world better in numerous ways and who will speak up for their beliefs.

What will be Marin's primary environmental battle over the next 40 years?

MG: The next 40 years should be devoted to defending, protecting, educating our politicians, citizens and visitors that our hard-won public open space, ocean and bays are sacrosanct and should not be violated by commercial development. We should give our full support to agencies that supervise these lands, such as [the] national parks system, California Coastal Commission and many others.

PF: I suspect we are not yet fully aware of primary environmental issues coming in the future but I fear many will be tied to climate change and sea level rise. Marin is part of the S.F. food shed. Climate shifts could alter this resource as well as the types of

woodlands and natural areas we all enjoy today. Plants and their pollinators are already making shifts in response and these sorts of changes may be difficult to adapt to creating serious misalignments and loss of sustainability.

KC: I think that the primary environmental battle of the next 40 years will be for public funding of the many programs and properties previously thought to be untouchable or "saved." I am thinking of education at all levels and state and local parklands such as China Camp. Funding problems make it much harder to get agencies and local governments to help their constituents to actually do something about their carbon footprint.

ND: There's never just one battle! With so many lands saved in Marin, it is easy to think that the major battles are behind us. These days, the battles are like the proverbial "thousand cuts"; every day public decisions are made that have environmental implications, and even if they seem minor, the cumulative effect adds up. Marin still has large acreages that look like open space but in fact are privately owned and have development potential. Streams are not adequately protected, and as a consequence we see disappearing populations of coho salmon and steelhead. Noxious plant species continue to invade public lands. Plastic and other waste continues to destroy our oceans. And so on...Don't wait for the next big battle when there is something to be done every day!

What lessons do you hope the next generation of environmentalists can learn from the battles of the past?

ND: Patience and persistence! Most "battles" go on and on. I can name some land-use battles in Marin that have persisted for more than 30 years, disappearing from view for years at a time, only to re-emerge for "prime time." My greatest concern for that next generation of environmentalists, however, is that they will have to face not only the day-to-day "battles," but the elusive battle of climate change, in which the "enemy" lurks in actions of the past and present and in our inability to "own up" to the dangers of continuing business as usual. The effects of climate change cannot be predicted with any precision. It will take enormous creativity by the generation of my children and grandchildren to deal with the unknowns that lie ahead.

KC: I hope that they will learn that there are no shortcuts. One must simply put one foot in front of the other and do the work. Attend the meetings. Send the emails. Support the politicians who are of a similar mind.

PF: I would hope the lessons the next generation of environmentalists can learn from the present and past is to be flexible and keep their eye on the important issues and matters, not just the battles at hand. Science matters, so use it well.

MG: To control global warming and overpopulation EFM must help establish a powerful local and global environmental ethic in our schoolchildren, families, voters, newcomers and politicians that includes respect, love and passion for our natural Mother Earth.

Email Jason at jwalsh@pacificsun.com.

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