



The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross



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FRENCH COULD TAKE LESSONS FROM TORREY HILLS

Jet lagged and already missing the sunny southern coast of France in spite of its strange new politics, I gazed out of the airplane window in time to catch a rare view of Del Mar and Carmel Valley through the clearest skies in memory.

The sky was so clear that I swear from 25,000 feet I caught a glimpse of Kathryn Burton's six precious acres of Torrey Hills open space lying somewhere in the vicinity of another hard won habitat preserve, Carmel Mountain with its connections to the magnificent Los Penasquitos Canyon and Los Penasquitos Lagoon.

Having spent several weeks in France during a critical and disappointing political campaign where 16 Presidential candidates of various stripes fought for the hearts and minds of a very bored and, as it turned out, ballot-shy electorate, I was looking for a symbol of the good things that come when folks do not give in to fashionable complacency.

The low voter turn-out in France allowed a smallish but potent group of the true-believing unhinged to fling a far right candidate who once called WWII gas chambers a "detail of history" into the run-off after he promised to get tough on crime and toss 4 million foreigners, read Muslims, out of the country.

Reading about the riots in Paris protesting the ultra-right Le Pen victory, I recalled more than one Frenchman, when asked about the campaign, answering "why vote," and using the Ralph Nader theory of politics, describing the assumed front runners as clones in favor of the European Union—Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum-ette.

I must admit that when Kathryn Burton dragged me over to see her patch of natural Nirvana soon after she moved into one of the first homes built in Torrey Hills, I responded with my own brand of weary skepticism, succumbing to "why fight."

At the time, the developer of Torrey Hills was sprinkling developer fairy dust downtown in front of a density hungry city planning staff while engaging in a little midnight grading on-site as an added incentive to transform this special habitat, already a respite for new residents, into multi-family housing.

With too little land at stake to attract San Diego's power brokering environmental groups, a politically well-connected developer property owner, and a baby Planning Board heavy with builder representation and saddled with developer written by-laws, there was little hope for saving the Torrey Hills open space park promised in the community plan.

But, unlike the bored indifference I witnessed in France, residents of Torrey Hills quickly took control of their future, including electing a residential majority to the Planning Board, conducting a Herculean fight against a neighborhood busting mega Chevron station and successfully completing a formidable negotiation with Vons to prevent fast-food chains from destroying the feel of their new Town Center.

All the while, away from the media circus that circled the Chevron story, Kathryn Burton, armed with signatures she collected from over 400 residents supporting her efforts, slugged away to save the unsavable.

And then, during the opening moments of the February Torrey Hills Planning Board hearing this year, Chair "Gentleman" Jim Casale, with the gracious style that characterized his term in office, congratulated and thanked a clearly shocked and uncharacteristically speechless Kathryn for the victory suddenly announced by the city planning department.

Unbeknownst to Kathryn and the rest of the community, the developer had reached an agreement with the City to restore the several acres he illegally graded, and Torrey Hills would retain its six-acre open space parkland. A dry eye was hard to find in the house that night.

And so, unlike the French intelligentsia, hysterically moaning after waking up Monday morning to find they did the Nader thing so well the smart folks stayed home election day, causing an international embarrassment not seen since McDonalds took up permanent residence on the Champs Elysee, Torrey Hills citizens know you cannot win if you do not play.

From the vantage point of my airplane window, Kathryn Burton's six-acre open space park looked bigger and prouder than all 2000 acres of Paris's Le Bois de Boulogne.

Katherine Burton was elected Chair of the Torrey Hills Planning Board last month when Jim Casale retired from the position. Lisa Ross can be reached at www.lisaross.com.