



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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A LITTLE CHUZTPAH AND VOILA CARMEL MOUNTAIN PRESERVE

Late in 1994, Carmel Valley natives Anne and Lee Harvey told me about their idea to create a nature park in Carmel Valley's Neighborhood 8A—the bureaucratic planning designation for 480 acres of one of the regions most astounding ecological wonderlands and the last remaining coastal mesa of its kind.

According to the Carmel Valley Master plan, 1500 homes, a shopping center and a school were supposed to replace the trails, chaparral covered mesas and rare vernal pools they knew from childhood.

There was something irresistible about their vision, Don Quixote-like as it seemed. I didn't realize that the idea of preserving the mesa, hatched during our coffee chat, would become a national environmental cause celebre, a seven year journey traversing a rocky landscape of widely reported confrontations with guys in hardhats and pinstriped suits, several near misses with bulldozers, thousands of hours at the negotiating table and a city wide political campaign.

I do remember telling them that our chances of protecting the rare habitat on such expensive coastal property were slim because the heart of the mesa was the prized possession of political powerhouse, Pardee Homes, with the rest of the 480 acres owned by 18 highly charged property owners desperate to develop.

And then, Endangered Habitats League president Michael Beck and Mike Kelly from Friends of Los Penasquitos Canyon appeared on the scene. Neighborhood 8A became ground zero in San Diego's environmental wars. As it turned out, not only was the place a beloved community hiking and horse riding area, but the only wildlife connection left between Los Penasquitos Canyon and Torrey Pines State Park and the home of 17 rare species.

Over the last decade, one development plan after another headed for a San Diego City Council vote, only to be met by vociferous protests from the public, including environmental groups like Sierra Club and the Native Plant Society. Five generations of Carmel Valley Planning boards had drawn the line in the development sand, here. Successive Chairs John Dean, Bob Rauch and Jan Fuchs presided over virtually unanimous board approvals of policies directed at preservation.

From the start, San Diego's Mayor Susan Golding recognized the importance of this area to environmentalists and to property owners. Golding was faced with the impossibility of two rights with no room for wrong, and no money to buy the expensive coastal land. During a Halloween night showdown in front of a packed City Council Chambers, she and Councilman Harry Mathis stopped a city manager's plan for 850 homes and ordered nineteen grumbling property owners, planning board representatives and environmentalists to the negotiating table.

Suddenly, an historic opportunity presented itself when Pardee Homes asked members of the planning board to help design their new Pacific Highlands Ranch community on agricultural land east of Carmel Valley. The price tag for our sweat equity: their 150 acres in Neighborhood 8A. And thus began an 18 month negotiation that resulted in the passage of Proposition M in 1998 and the dedication of Pardee's property to the new Carmel Mountain Preserve along with another 1300 acres of open space in Pacific Highlands Ranch. With the core of the preserve in place, settlements were reached with other property owners resulting in conservation of almost 300 acres.

Yet, just a year ago, we were back in front of the bulldozers to prevent the destruction of vernal pool watershed and construction of homes on top of the mesa preserve. Again, Mayor Golding intervened and presided over another year-long negotiation. Last week, quietly and outside the media glare characteristic for the park, San Diego City Council approved a final funding package of state and local money that ensures the survival of a 9.5 acre vernal pool complex on the southeast corner, completing the city's newest open space park.

After ten years, waking up without worrying about Carmel Mountain is taking some getting used to. But, the magnificent open space park hovering over Carmel Valley is a testament to what a community group with a little vision and a lot of chutzpah can accomplish.