

Susan Schwartz's talk for Bay Nature Local Environmental Hero Award

Thank you. Mulling over what to say here, I asked some folks what they thought Friends of Five Creeks had contributed over these 29 years, since the group was founded by Sonja Wadman, an Americorps intern hired by the City of Albany, back in the mid-90s heyday of reviving urban creeks.

I came along by chance when Sonja was headed for graduate school. (She now runs a significant New England land trust.) My children no longer needed so much time. The rest of the story is too complicated to even begin, but big parts of what I see as our strengths have been openness to opportunities and developing ideas of others.

Here's an example: Friends of Five Creeks became an effective organization because Todd Jersey, a local architect and great cheerleader, persuaded me that in just a few weekends, we could build a bridge railing at Codornices Creek on the Ohlone Greenway - and he would design it for free. It took a lot more than a few weekends, but we cut the pavement, tied the rebar, poured the concrete - and did it.

Along the way Todd noticed trout in the creek. These turned out to include steelhead. (I didn't believe him.) Their fate remains uncertain, and protecting them is still a big part of our work.

This has been a big, messy group effort by neighbors, firms, and students plus a board that all got their hands dirty. I wish I could acknowledge them all here.

The greatest joys have been when people who might never meet in daily life come together and do something. Conversely, my biggest mistakes have been when I tried to impose my solutions. None of us has answers.

I see Friends of Five Creeks as one of many streamlets that flowed from the vision and political groundwork of Doug Wolfe, Gary Mason, Carole Schemmerling, Ann Riley, and the Urban Creeks Council in 1980s Berkeley and Richmond. The waves they made reached Napa's revitalized downtown that no longer floods, Nine Mile River excavated from a slag heap in central Pittsburg, a freeway replaced by a park-flanked river in Seoul, South Korea.

Here at home, these pioneers built a framework of creek policies and grants to support their dream of creeks as green threads in the urban fabric. They were reviving ideas of illustrious planners hired, and widely disregarded, in California's boom-and-bust growth after the Gold Rush. Few ideas are new.

Friends of Five Creeks has had a lot of both fun and real joy in our less than glamorous role. We have been the unpaid janitors in more or less natural areas that had become unwelcoming to dangerous. I see us as helping out, and sometimes speaking out, where visions met harsh reality. Harsh reality includes projects

undertaken based on a few truths, without understanding the complexities of nature or people. It includes our cumbersome, costly, and ultimately irresponsible scaffold of grants, consultants, and regulations. It includes failure to recognize maintenance needs and costs, as well as democracy's shifting priorities and fashions. It includes urban complications from thoughtless litter to our failures with mental illness and homelessness, and now a fast-changing world of droughts, deluges, and devastating fires.

In our role as skeptical janitors, success is when areas welcome people and a reasonable diversity of plants and wildlife. It's when larger entities or some new group takes over, providing affordable maintenance. It's also a society that cultivates opportunities for people to contribute, work together, and carry out their positive ideas far beyond making comments or donating money. Our social capital and democracy need this.

So getting back to where I started -- what have we contributed?

Some places where we have worked are now reasonably stable and welcoming urban oases. Stroll lower Cerrito Creek. Berkeley's little Mortar Rock Park is a gem of native-plant biodiversity and human use. Shorebird Park's Bay shore is no longer walled off by brush, and on a larger scale, French broom no longer is the most visible plant in many of Tilden Regional Park's most popular areas.

- After our early big work parties in the North Basin Strip, John Kenny from our board and a handful of others transformed that shoreline into a colorful welter of native plants, a lab for what is possible on other old garbage dumps lining our Bay shorelines.
- Local groups are taking on what needs to be done in the El Cerrito Hillside Natural Area, 100 acres of fire-prone nature where we controlled a powder keg of broom over more than a decade.
- A couple of independents, Alfredo Chingcuanco and Pavel Moldenhawer take responsibility and find creative solutions for much of Codornices Creek west of San Pablo, along with Albany's wildlands manager Margot Cunningham and interns from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This comes with failure. Like everyone who does this for awhile, we have abandoned projects. We have had years of work wiped out and our hearts broken. Currently, storms, erosion, and salt intrusion are destroying what we thought we had achieved on at the mouth of Strawberry Creek in Eastshore State Park.

But physical places may not be our most important contributions.

One of our board members suggested that one might be aware of plants we label invasive. There is no such thing as a bad plant, but pretty little Algerian sea lavender sneaks under other salt marsh dwellers and overwhelms them. Bindweed and cape ivy wall off creeks and hog soil and light. This is not to mention plants that become tinder or torches. Of course, this is part of the broad stream of education and political work of the California Invasive Plant Council, down to what I'll call the Leprechauns -people who work close to alone, doing probably more than you know to rein in plants that don't play well with others.

Many have observed that volunteers' looking and reporting can be more valuable than their immediate task. For example, before I joined Friends of Five Creeks, a grad student pioneered water-quality monitoring on Cerrito Creek. But seeing gunk flushed down Cerrito Creek led to significant changes in EBMUD practices. Like a lot of what was done in the big early wave of creek groups, those methods and materials are now deprecated, outlawed, or fenced off with expensive permits.

I used to lead a lot of nature walks, from wild edibles to King Tides - King Tides walks were an idea we pioneered. We still do a fair amount of citizen science, using frameworks not ideal for the purpose to build baseline data for climate change. It's hard to know if this will have ultimate value.

We took over Cindy Spring's wonderful talk series and ran it for six years, until COVID shut it down. I like to think that Bay Nature talks are now carrying that torch far and wide, with post-COVID technology.

Lacking evidence, I take on faith that we influenced for good those thousands of volunteers getting down and dirty in nature. What is the value of planting a plant with your children? Of working out your office frustration on weeds? Of us old folks getting exercise and company and still achieving? I joke that the most important thing we do is introduce young folks to using tools. I am deeply grateful to the Scout leaders and blue-collar workers who taught me the little I know about these things.

People want to contribute, and our democracy needs them to do this. It's important that people come together independently, work out how to do something, and get it done. Let's cultivate ways for them to do this.