



Three Women, Three Generations, One Environment: Three profiles in honor of women's history month

By Naomi Lubick and Stephen Brody, Science Interchange Reporters

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Cascade Canyon is the reason that Karin Urquhart is an environmental activist. When Urquhart was a teenager, she lived just outside the once private property in Fairfax. She would take her dog (and a dozen or so neighborhood dogs) with her on a daily walk to the reflecting pools and streams, to see the ferns or Cascade Waterfall itself. Urquhart left Marin for a few years to live in Southern California, where she started raising her family, but she returned in 1971.

"Lo and behold, this area that I loved so much, with waterfalls and creeks, was up for development, zoned for 23 condominium units," she said in a recent interview. "Not over my dead body," was her response.

Urquhart plunged into the work of saving Cascade Canyon. The job took her into contact with government officials, activist organizations, and interested individuals, all with amazing results. Cascade Canyon became the first major purchase under the Marin County Open Space District, after Urquhart helped lead the campaign for the district's establishment in 1972 by a majority of Marin voters. County government funds paid for two thirds of the land, and a third of the land, which contained the waterfall, was bought by Debbie Ettinger, as a memorial park to her twin sister Pamela.

"Every day, my husband and I walk our dogs up to Cascade Canyon," Urquhart says.

From 1973 to 1995, Urquhart served as the Marin County Open Space Committee Chair, during which time she also held other positions, maintained her high level of community activism, and raised her children. She held the position of executive director of the Marin Conservation League for 15 years and served as its president for three. Although she says she is semi-retired now, Urquhart, who is in her mid-60s, continues to serve as a board member for the Marin Agricultural Land Trust.

"From that campaign, I just became involved. I met all these people, most of whom became very good friends," Urquhart says, including Gloria Duncan and Phyllis Faber, other great women activists of the same generation in Marin. "All of us, I believe, considered our activism by trying to understand the other person's position. Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion, and to understand and listen to it whether you disagree or not—it opens doors for you."

Urquhart says that, like her own experience, personal passion brings most people to the environmental table. Instilling that passion and maintaining it is important. "We need to always be aware of what we have here and that there always can be a threat to it," she says. "There are people now who have come behind me who have the strength to stay vigilant, and we need that fresh blood."

Marilee Eckert is one of the women following in Karin Urquhart's footsteps, and she has said almost exactly the same thing. "Working with kids, because they're our future and they need to know about this," she says, is the key to protecting the environment. "After I get tired and I need to take a break, I need the people coming behind me to take up the charge."

Eckert is the executive director of the Marin Conservation Corps, a group that trains young people about the environment and gets them outside working on habitat restoration, trail maintenance and fire prevention, among other projects. She has been the head of the Corps for 10 years, after working in Oakland with another youth corps organization.

In college, Eckert says, she worked hard on women's rights. "That involvement, as a feminist, made me look at nontraditional careers. I think that really helped me to move in this direction," she said. "One of the things that I feel really strongly about and what I encourage here is equal opportunities for everyone." She has found that women in the outdoor projects sponsored by the Corps, who do hard physical labor or work with power tools in the fire reduction projects, often move into positions of leadership.

Eckert's own training was in psychology and counseling, and while she was teaching, she worked at outdoor education summer camps. "That's where I really fell in love with being outside and where I could see how exposing people to the out-of-doors and to the natural environment could really enrich their lives," Eckert said. "And that's how I melded the two, the psychology background with the environment."

That experience has helped her current position. Eckert says the Corps has broadened its education outreach programs, working in the schools, establishing recycling projects, and talking to community residents about taking care of the environment.

Eckert says that what she likes best is project-based learning, such as what her two daughters do in their middle school classes. Her daughters, both adopted from Ethiopia, have picked up some of their environmental ethics from her, of course. She says she was happy to hear one of them walk into a room behind her, where Eckert herself had left the light on, and say, "Don't you know we're having an energy crisis?" before flipping the switch. "The more that they work on [environmental] projects in the schools," Eckert says about children, "it opens their eyes to what is important."

Childhood asthma opened Debbie Hubsmith's eyes to the environment. "I was keenly aware that my health was affected by the environment," she said. Hubsmith grew up in New Jersey and would go into New York City regularly to visit her father. "I noticed when I went to the city, being around the traffic affected my breathing," she said.

A handful of recently published scientific reports support the idea that pollution and asthma are linked, though the results are not conclusive. What is certain, Hubsmith says, is that "the biggest thing that we do is drive cars every day. Cars have an impact on a global scale on climate and locally on air quality."

After working on carpooling and livable community issues, Hubsmith became the executive director of the Marin County Bicycle Coalition in 1998. The organization works "to promote biking as a means of everyday transportation," she says, because "if you get them out on a bicycle, it changes how people perceive the environment—not only the gasoline use issues, but also the natural environment around them, meeting their neighbors—being out on your bike gets you more in tune with those things."

Hubsmith, who talks quickly and energetically, says that her motivation to reduce car dependence and get people onto bikes is the health of the environment, particularly with regard to the natural resources used in feeding cars. “We’re building a national model that sells bicycling as energy conservation as a nation,” she says.

“We work with kids to get them to bike and walk to school,” Hubsmith continues, “which teaches them about how their personal choices affect the environment.” It also gets them outside and moving, in a generation that Hubsmith says is being raised in a very sedentary fashion. Part of persuading kids to bike to school (and people to commute by bike to work) is a personal health argument in a period of increasing obesity incidence across the nation, she says.

As part of “walking the talk,” Hubsmith says she has lived without a car for six years now, as a result of a car accident. “I definitely have hope—there are so many stories that people tell me about how they’ve changed their behavior based on seeing me live my life without a car and how you can take a leadership role as a younger person,” she says, speaking as a 30-something Gen-X-er. “One of the things that I’m dedicated to is nurturing and empowering young people, especially schoolchildren.” Anyone, young and old, she says, can make something happen, “through writing letters, through talking to government representatives, through just being present.”

RESOURCES

Marin Conservation Corps: www.marincc.org or call (415) 454-4554.

Marin Agricultural Land Trust: www.malt.org or call (415) 663-1158.

To find out what projects the Marin County Bicycle Coalition is working on, including a 25-mile trail on the old railroad right-of-way along Highway 101: www.marinbike.org or call (415) 456-3469.

Among their several categories, the Marin Women’s Hall of Fame honors women environmentalists. Karin Urquhart received the award in 1993, and you can find more information at: www.marinwomen.org