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Volume 6, Issue 15

SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO, CALIFORNIA

April 11-17, 2008

The Past Preserved

Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy offers untouched wildlands

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Joshua Michael Evans among the wildflowers at the conservancy. Photo courtesy of Mike Evans

www.thecapistranodispatch.com

Eye on SJC

COVER STORY **A Window to the Past**

Just east of Capistrano, The Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy preserves the wildlands

By Jonathan Volzke
The Capistrano Dispatch

Pauline Faye remembers her first hike through The Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy. California oaks. Coastal sage scrub. Native grasses. And not a house in sight. In a sea of development, The Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy is an 1,200-acre oasis off Ortega Highway.

"I loved it," recalls Faye, a member and a volunteer. "I thought, 'This is the most amazing, pristine place, so close to all the developed world. Every direction I looked, all I saw was beautiful California nature. I couldn't believe any direction I looked, there was no development.'"

Yet the refuge from development was made largely possible by development. The conservancy started as the Rancho Mission Viejo Land Conservancy in 1990 to compensate for land lost to the development of Talega in San Clemente. The area was part of Rancho Mission Viejo and identified by biologists as largely undisturbed, making it the perfect spot for a window to California's natural past. Today, the conservancy is open for guided events and is a center of environmental education and activities throughout South County. And with the winter's rains, spring has brought a flood of colorful native flowers. A Frog and Toad Walk this weekend has already booked up.

San Juan Capistrano's Mike Evans, the vice president of the conservancy board, says it was one of the first spots where planners and environmentalists agreed that saving one large ecosystem would be a better trade-off for development than creating a series of disconnected green belts or parks. The mitigation was key, because of the size of the Talega development. Even at 50 percent open space, the Talega area is approved for 3,500 homes, with about 3,180 now built, and more than 20 miles of private streets.

"The mitigation was kind of revolutionary," says Evans, who owns Tree of Life Nursery not far from the conservancy. "Until then, all the mitigation was being done right on site, and we would have had Talega developed with a bunch of cut up, so-called natural areas in the development, which have not functioned as an ecosystem at all but would have gotten the project in."

Instead, the developers of the 3,500-acre Talega project paid \$250,000 as an endowment for the conservancy, said Pat Barry, the Talega town manager. The conservancy property is actually still owned by Rancho Mission Viejo, but sits within a conservation easement. The name was changed in honor of Donna O'Neill, a steadfast supporter of the conservancy and served on its board of directors until her death in 2002. Evans has been involved since the beginning, too.

"I'm very fortunate in that I like to hike... this year especially I've been out there a few times because the wildflowers have been really good," Evans says. "It's a truly left-alone state. You see those wildlife species you don't find anymore, liked horned lizards and trapdoor spiders. I grew up in the Back Bay and it seemed like they were in every vacant lot.



Former Executive Director Laura Cohen leads a walk in The Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy in 2006. Education is a key goal of the conservancy. Photo by Linda McMillin Pyle

Now they seem very scarce."

The conservancy, a registered nonprofit, is managed by a seven-member board and has a paid half-time executive director and half-time program director. It relies on memberships and fund-raising for most of its budget.

According to the organization's 2006 tax return, the conservancy brought in \$120,000 that year and spent \$116,200 on programs and services. That, according to Board President Gilbert Aguirre, includes programs—from walking tours to astronomy nights—at least six days a month and slide presentations in 83 classrooms for 1,627 students. Another 1,400 children visited on field trips.

Also in 2006, the conservancy used a \$30,000 grant to buy bird feeders for seven schools in the Capistrano Unified School District. The grant, from the Orange County Community Foundation, was for an environmental science program for third-graders, most of whom were from Capo. Another component of the program involved the purchase of binoculars, which students used for onsite observation and identification of birds at schools.

Other components involved studying different bird beak and bill adaptations, as well as making a field trip to the conservancy to compare birds found at a natural site rather than a school site.

The conservancy also participated in events ranging from the Children's Water Festival to Earth Day in Upper Newport Bay. More than 5,500 people participated directly in the programs, with more than 150 volunteers contributing more than 1,800 hours of work, according to the tax filing. Executive Director Heidi Keller says this past year's

budget was less than previous years, about \$97,000.

As part of the mitigation that created the conservancy, Talega also pays \$25 per unit per year, or about \$80,000 annually. But San Clemente residents and officials are increasingly raising concerns that the money does not reach the conservancy. Under control of the county, it instead goes to other environmental efforts throughout the county.

On February 7, San Clemente City Councilmember Steve Knoblock requested City Manager George Scarborough prepare a memo for council to clarify why the \$25 annual contribution from households in Talega are being directed to other efforts. Councilmember Jim Dahl says, "It seemed odd to me that it would go to the Central Coast instead of to the conservancy for programs."

Evans says the conservancy has been successful at its fund-raising, and membership remains strong, with annual dues bringing in an average of \$10,000 yearly, Keller says. As one of those members, Faye volunteers and does everything from helping mail the conservancy's quarterly newsletter to more than 1,200 people and organizations, to clearing trails of weeds or non-native materials.

"It's just an amazing experience of walking under the California oak trees and among all the native California plants," Faye says. "It must be what it was like when the Indians were first there. It's like being able to see it as the first explorers of the area saw it."

The conservancy (949.489.9778), off Ortega Highway just east of Antonio Parkway, is open for specific events only. ■

Upcoming Events

For all of the events, it's recommended to bring water, good shoes, sunscreen, a hat and a camera and binoculars, in some cases. For all events, except the Sierra Sage Walk, call 949.489.9778 for reservations and directions. See www.theconservancy.org for a full event calendar.



The conservancy holds several events monthly. Photo by Linda McMillin Pyle

Sunday, April 13

9 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Wildflower Walk, explores the wildlands with a naturalist guide. Donation: \$10, adults; \$5, children; members free. Ages 8 and up.

Saturday, April 19

8 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Trail Clearing and Weeding, drinks and sandwiches provided. Free. Ages 10 and up.

Saturday, April 26

9:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Family Nature Walk, wander through the conservancy with a naturalist guide. Donation: \$10, adults; \$5, children; members free. Ages 6 and up.

Sunday, April 27

8:30 a.m.-11 a.m. NABA Butterfly Walk, learn to identify butterflies with members of the North American Butterfly Association. Donation: \$10, adults; \$5, children; members free. Ages 8 and up.

Sunday, April 27

9 a.m.-11 a.m. Sierra Sage Walk, slow-paced walk to enjoy scenery. Donation: \$10, adults; \$5, children; members free. Ages 6 and up. Call 949.361.7534 for reservations and directions.

HOT LINKS
GET ON THE WEB

www.theconservancy.org