



## Interview with SkyPark Project Manager Bill Johnson

**S** OFA President Hugh Bialecki had the opportunity to sit down with SkyPark at Santa's Village Project Manager Bill Johnson to talk about his personal history with Santa's Village, his vision for the future of SkyPark, and what it means to our community and the theme park world.

**Q:** *Bill, you clearly have a passion for Santa's Village. Would you give our readers some background on your involvement with the property?*

**A:** First time here was as a kid walking from Hook Creek up through the Boy Scout Camp and seeing Lady Bug Pond for the first time. That was my first introduction to the property, I was probably 10 or 12 years old, and explored the back country of it, never coming into the park. When I was 13 1/2 yrs old I applied for a job and got hired, it was my first job, as an elf. Then I was a ride operator, I was good with animals so I ran the burro ride, then the following year got trained on every other ride in the park. The burros were led by a horse, so in between breaks we would unhook the horse and ride, so I have ridden every square inch of the property. It was a great introduction because I met so many friends.

**Q:** *Would you describe your vision for SkyPark at Santa's Village and how the reopening came to be?*

**A:** It wasn't necessarily going to be Santa's Village, when we first picked up the park my interest was to change the model, and this still holds true today. When we first started, it was going to be, as I saw it, a prototype of what would be the new amusement park industry; meaning not gas powered, or hydraulics, but adventure, self-propelled, eco-park type attractions that are educational, and healthy. What I think is a smarter way to design parks, and I hope that this idea takes off across the country. People will see that this is successful and can sustain itself.

It's a challenge because if you look at the dynamics of parks in general, they don't sustain themselves. The County can't afford them, they are leasing them out, they want the burden of parks off their back. If this Project is successful, it would be huge, proving



- Project Manager Bill Johnson in front of "Santa's House"

to people we can make an educational park that is good for the environment that is good for families, and embraces everything that Walt Disney wanted to do. His original concept was go to the park for a weekend, and the family can be together, have this experience together. That's still the premise of what this is about, but the vision is to make it more about educating people, showing them what a cultural resource this is. We've morphed it, and now SkyPark is Santa's Village where we haven't erased the past, we do have that fun, Christmas, and an awesome resort feel to it now.

For me, the challenge is how do you get an eco-park that is educational, can do tours, can bring school districts up and teach them about the environment, and have educational programs layered into this, and who pays for that, how do you make that sustainable? This is a hybrid and could be a way for parks to use as a model on how you can still put the environment first, sustain it, and make improvements to it.

We will constantly be revisiting the meadow, and constantly be revisiting the park to see how we can make it a better educational experience for people. I don't want roller coasters, go karts, or some 3D virtual thing that zooms across the property; you don't need that to make it a success. We could be a great example.

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- Pam Carver and Jane Guttman at Carol Pedder's Memorial

## Welcome to My Celebration: Carol Joyce Pedder 1936 - 2016

The trees, nurtured by rain and sun, have also been nourished by the deep and enduring love of Carol Pedder, environmentalist extraordinaire. Carol's love of the forest and all of its inhabitants was remarkable to behold, her passion rising in all circumstances to protect and ensure conservation.

From SOFA's birth to the last days of Carol's life, her concern for the well-being and for the continuation of life for the woodlands, the waterways, and all living creatures was unyielding for this selfless, creative, inspirational, and mighty advocate. In written and spoken word, and in decades of advocacy, Carol's heart and spirit soared with love, respect, resolve, and wisdom for the generations that will follow her stewardship and ideal for *saving our forest*. Carol's legacy will live on in the work of her fellow conservationists, and in the hearts and minds of others who knew her and recognize her seminal contribution to this mountain.

Carol loved all animals, protected them, rescued them, and was both a gentle and fierce guardian. She penned a book, *If Little Bear Creek Could Speak Out Loud*, written in the voice of Little Bear Creek, to be published posthumously. This stirring poetic narrative professes the creek's love of the season cycles and of *her* beloved, kindred animal companions, as well as *her* angst at the looming threats.

Carol was not only a friend of the mountain, but a friend of humankind. As a nurse, she used humor, compassion, and wisdom to effect healing, and as a holistic hypnotherapist and Reiki practitioner, she brought well-being to many. A true humanitarian, Carol provided hospice care for someone she met who lived with dire circumstances, offering solace, her home, heart, and compassionate care.

Carol will be immensely missed, was loved widely, and she will have our gratitude infinitely for her service and devotion. Watch for Carol in the raindrops and the snowflakes. She will be there.

## Update on the Status of the Land & Water Conservation Fund

Last year the 50-year-old congressional program for funding land protection of private inholdings in National Parks and Forests (known as the Land & Water Conservation Fund) was scheduled to expire.

In an 11<sup>th</sup> hour effort, Congress extended it for three years, creating a limited opportunity for supporters to still try to have the program permanently re-authorized.

A small window of opportunity still exists in 2016. While Congress recessed, the LWCF Coalition focused on getting as many groups as possible to sign onto a national support letter, on which SOFA's name has been added.

Permanent authorization of LWCF passed the Senate in April as an amendment to the Energy Bill, but not in the House. However, there currently are 216 co-sponsors of permanent authorization in the House (plus others who have voted for or signed letters supporting permanent authorization). The national letter indicates how much support exists across the country and emphasizes the need to find a solution before the end of the current Congress.

During the September session there were opening statements made on the Energy Bill in the Joint Conference Committee of the House and Senate. The conference is critical to permanently authorizing LWCF, because only the Senate version of this bill includes permanent authorization, while the House version does not. Moreover, the Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, Rob Bishop, who is leading the opposition against permanent reauthorization, is also co-chairing the conference committee.

Chairman Bishop will be loudly arguing against including any additional authorization of the LWCF in a final Energy Bill. Hopefully LWCF supporters on the conference committee will be able to offset his opposition. House conferees must agree to include permanent authorization for it to be ultimately approved. There are three California Representatives serving on the committee. They include Lois Capps of Santa Barbara, Jared Huffman of San Rafael and Doris Matsui of Sacramento, but they are Democrats in a Republican-controlled Congress.

It is hoped that the broad national support for LWCF will help override Chairman Bishop's opposition, but the final outcome remains to be seen.



## Nestle Extraction of Strawberry Creek Water - Update

**H**ere is a summary of what is currently happening with Strawberry Creek, the expired Forest Service Permit, and the Rimforest Storm Drain Project.

The five year drought continues to reduce flows in Strawberry Creek and other San Bernardino Mountain streams. This summer again had some of the lowest flows on record for Strawberry. We have gotten an inch of rain in the watershed in the last several weeks and this has helped with the flows, but scientists are not expecting a wet winter for us, so chances are that the drought will continue. It is important that we do all we can to get water back into the stream and groundwater to protect the health of the Forest and the many species of plants and animals that live there.



- Steve Loe at Strawberry Creek

The Federal Court decided that Nestlé's predecessor had applied to renew the permit and it was the Forest Service's fault that it was never dealt with, so the permit remains in force. Nestle has refused to reduce their pumping of water, and it appears that the Forest Service may be counting on the State Department of Water Resources to decide whether Nestle or the Forest Service have the rights to the water. Our friends and collaborators have provided reams of proof that there are not actually water rights for Nestle, and that the wells and tunnels are really proof that the water is groundwater and not spring water. Groundwater is owned by the state and the overlying landowner has the right to use the water and decide how it is used. It is National Forest and public water, not Nestlé's.

The Forest Service is nearing completion on the analysis of public comment and has said they will be getting back soon to all of us that commented on their proposed action for the permit earlier this year. Hopefully they will modify their proposal to better

understand and protect the stream as we all requested. Most respondents wanted the National Forest protected, water withdrawal stopped until the drought is over, and until the groundwater recovers. Many wanted the studies done by the Forest Service or their contractors and not by Nestle and their contractors. We will have to wait and see if they listened to us. We need to continue to do all we can to make sure the new permit protects the stream and its plants and animals.

Another potential threat to Strawberry Creek is the proposed Rimforest Storm Drain Project. This project is being proposed by San Bernardino County to stop the runoff from Rimforest and surrounding mountaintops from flowing over the large landslide below Rimforest and into the headwaters of Strawberry Creek. Runoff from the community was never properly dealt with, and it has resulted in a huge landslide and erosion area on the south side of Rimforest. This massive amount of material that has been deposited in Strawberry Creek has severely degraded the stream. Getting the community runoff and flooding off of the landslide will help Strawberry recover over time. The stream bottom will eventually stabilize much more and not be subject to burial every time it floods.

Sending the water north to Little Bear Creek will also impact the groundwater that feeds Strawberry Creek in the summer. We have asked the County to consider Strawberry Creek summer flows and to try to get as much water as possible to stay on the mountain to recharge the groundwater. Summer flows in Strawberry Creek are critical to the plants and animals and they are totally dependent upon groundwater. We have asked the County to consider a design that will slow the runoff and allow for groundwater infiltration. Nestle already takes so much groundwater that we can't afford to lose more.

- Steve Loe



## Church of the Wood Update

The long existing CUP application for the Church of the Woods Project on Hwy 18 in Rimforest is still pending before the SB County Land Use Services Department. Heidi Duron, Supervising Planner, in Land Use Services, has reported on September 12, 2016, that there is no change in the status of this project and nothing new submitted. We will continue to monitor this currently dormant project.

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**Q:** *SkyPark has been in development now for over two years, when do you expect the park to be fully operational?*

**A:** Fully operational I would expect in June 2017. That would be ideal, getting the environmental review and EIR done this winter and getting it through the CUP process with the conditions of approval and meeting those conditions. We've got a lot of work to do. That's why I've got to get the environmental sector done. For this to be successful, people need to be able to come up on a Friday, spend the night, enjoy our mountain, come here on Saturday, enjoy the day, and maybe even stay Saturday night, making a weekend adventure at SkyPark.



*- Contractor Pat Brennan and Manager Bill Johnson*

**Q:** *Our SOFA Board feels very positive about the outdoor recreational and educational experience that could await visitors. How do you market that to likely visitors?*

**A:** I think it's easy. We don't. We let them experience the park for the first time; they're going to come to the park thinking it's Santa's Village. The idea is you bring them to the door and give them the exposure by having scheduled environmental science tours: one on botany, one on biology, etc., as part of the ticket price. You've paid, so why not take the tour? We don't market that, we let them market it.

We have gone to great expense to bring fiber optics into the park; we have the fastest internet on the mountain and can stream out anything you can put on your phone. So when you come in and get a pass, with Wi-Fi, you and your kids are plugged in. You can Facebook or Instagram your visit and tell people what you're doing and market the park at the same time. We think it will take off and people will self-educate. We are already getting good social media

exposure; people are signing up for more information.

**Q:** *You now have a Temporary Use Permit from the County. What will be SkyPark's expected maximum capacity?*

**A:** We will be restricted on how many cars we can park (300) on the north lot only with the south lot closed. We have a great relationship with Mountain Transit and will have a bus running hourly from 10 am to 10 pm starting in April, and it will go from Crestline to SkyPark and back, hopefully running through Running Springs also. It will go by the Lake Arrowhead Resort and other areas of interest. We are trying to get the car use down as much as possible. Our maximum capacity is probably around 1000 people. Our website is designed for online ticket sales to manage visitors and vehicles.

**Q:** *Several of our Board members were brainstorming the environmental education component of SkyPark. How will you show visitors the unique ecology of the park?*

**A:** There will be monuments/postings as you go through different parts of the park, demonstrating unique environmental features and including historical photos. We are considering a phone app identifying significant features, much like going to a museum and having headphones and voice recordings...but using your own smart phone for an audio and video guide. We will also have pamphlets and newsletters to hand out to visitors. We may have stations or kiosks along walking and biking paths to help guide and orient visitors. We want these features to be interactive so people are engaged.

We brought 5th graders from VOE School in last year explaining the biology of the meadow, which was a huge success, and we have been in conversations with San Bernardino School District for 5th grade environmental education. If we can use them as a pilot program, we can really open the door to teach people about the environment. You are not going to get environmental quality in the future unless you are teaching kids what that means.

**Q:** *Could there be value in ongoing dialogue between local environmental groups and SkyPark to anticipate and solve problem issues prior to County decision making?*

**A:** There is value to that idea. What I have learned in going through this process was how misunderstood the park was from day one. As soon as we made a move with the County of San Bernardino it felt like we were just simply under attack. There was such a lack of trust that just because we didn't write



## *-Sky Park – Continued from Page 4*

something down the assumption was it wasn't written down because we weren't doing it. So I think there needs to be a level of trust as we try and put together something that is as good for our community as we can; we are not coming in here to do this financial mogul of an amusement park. That was never the intent from the start; it was trying to resurrect a cultural resource; it was an environmental mess from the logging.

What we have been able to accomplish in two years in the meadow and the forest is huge. We have been barely able to do it because of the opposition from some of the environmental groups. The backlash makes the County afraid that they are going to be sued because we're not going through the process, or you need to put more information or more detail in this. We have done so much detail. I feel we could get their support, if they could get involved in the process; come up and walk it, just as you have with me. If we go walk it and talk about these education ideas, and do it together as partners, it's a win-win.

There is a lot of what we are doing where there is no existing guide. What about the other 150 acres where we took three miles of barbed wire fence out? There wasn't a form to fill out; we just did it because it was the right thing to do. You and I have talked about fencing a lot, and about the migratory wildlife patterns. We all knew from day one that deer come across the road and it was a given that we would never fence the property, instead we took all the fencing out; however, the letters that went to the County said, "Hey, stop this project, we want to see a fencing plan". That's great, I get it, but that slows the project down. If concerned people came out to see what was there and were collectively involved, then that fencing discussion wouldn't come up in letters. If people have concerns, come to the park, call me on the phone, and say we want to see what you are doing. We want people to see what we are doing and that we are doing it right. I think that's important

## **Veterans Monument at Arrowhead Ridge**

**F**riday, November 11, 2016, saw the Dedication of the Veterans Monument, an Eagle Scout Project of Liam Gavigan, BSA Troop 89.

Veterans and current service members from all branches of the armed forces were welcomed by Captain Benjamin Cloud and led in prayer by Rebecca Iacolino and Rick Gavigan (Past Scoutmaster of BSA Troop 89 and father of Liam Gavigan). The program included the posting of colors by a well represented color guard. Veterans were honored by County and State elected officials. Local middle and high school *Voice of Democracy* competition winners were recognized. Music and refreshments were followed by a

Formal Flag Retirement Ceremony and benediction and taps played by Steve Ferrera completed the event.



*- Veterans attending the Dedication at Arrowhead Ridge*

The site for this highly attended community event was at Arrowhead Ridge (formerly Eagle Ridge) where the seeds of the Save Our Forest Association were germinated almost thirty years ago; from USFS public open space, to private ownership intended for development, to acquisition by the San Bernardino Mountains Land Trust, this beautiful property is now in public trust. Honoring our veterans with this monument in this location further contributes to our mountain quality of life.

Thank you Liam for your vision, conviction, and dedication to working with many in the community to accomplish your goal!



*Highway 18 Clean-up: Hugh Bialecki and Lori Semeniuk were there as were Carl and Trudie Blank. An additional helper, Carl's daughter Sherri Wadsworth, also pitched in. Maureen Mann provided coffee and refreshments for the group. To join our wonderful crew contact Trudie at [blankc@chater.net](mailto:blankc@chater.net).*