



LOCAL

Conservationist Diane Nygaard picked as Oceanside Senior Volunteer of the Year



Diane Nygaard, left, Oceanside Senior Volunteer of the Year, with Oceanside Mayor Esther Sanchez. Nygaard's name was added to a perpetual plaque of volunteers that will hang in the Oceanside Public Library. (Courtesy of the City of Oceanside.)

She started one of the area's largest nonprofit conservation groups, Preserve Calavera

BY LINDA MCINTOSH

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OCEANSIDE — Conservationist Diane Nygaard has been picked as Oceanside Senior Volunteer of the Year for her efforts to protect wetlands and natural open spaces and create parks along with protecting Native American sacred sites in and around Oceanside.

Almost as soon as Nygaard moved to Oceanside in the late 1990s, she started volunteering. She founded Preserve Calavera in 2001. It is now one of the area's largest nonprofit conservation groups. Under her leadership, the group raised awareness about the importance of wetlands and worked with the community on saving land around Lake Calavera and wildlife corridors in Carlsbad and Oceanside. She was instrumental in the acquisition of the 134 acres known as the Sherman property in Carlsbad. It is now the Buena Vista Creek Ecological Reserve.

“The Sierra Club always says conservationists get started with an issue in their backyard, then their backyard gets bigger. That certainly happened with me,” said Nygaard, who has lived in Ocean Hills near Lake Calavera for more than 25 years.

Before buying their home there, Nygaard and her husband, Dennis, checked to make sure the open space the home looked out on was protected. They were assured it was. But six months later they saw bulldozers on some of those hillsides.

“That started me and my neighbors researching the status of that open space,” Nygaard said. That was the beginning of Preserve Calavera.

“Once started, we soon realized you can't preserve just an island of open space. You need to protect the wildlife corridor linkages and the watershed. So our scope became much larger than just my 'backyard,’” Nygaard said.

Now, more than 20 years later, a good part of that area is permanently protected as the city of Carlsbad's Lake Calavera Preserve and as the state's Calavera Highlands Ecological Reserve.

"It took years of effort and work by hundreds of community volunteers," said Nygaard, who was named Wetland Community Leader in 2008 by the Environmental Law Institute

"Developers have too much influence on local politicians, and they do not place a high value on protecting our natural resources. This remains an on-going challenge. We keep fighting the same battles over and over. Each developer only needs to win once," Nygaard said.

Ellen Bartlett, Preserve Calavera board member, said: "When you work with Diane and see her interacting with others, it's quite obvious how exceptional she is. She has specific goals in mind and works to influence those around her so that she can accomplish them. ... Diane is extremely persistent and generally will not take no for an answer if she believes that she can influence a city project/plan or new development to be more sustainable and protect our local habitats."

Another decades-long effort was El Corazon Park.

In the late '90's, Nygaard began working with the senior residents of the Oceana community, including leaders Lou and Dixie Bales, along with other leaders and community members, to develop a "dream park" called El Corazón on a 450-acre property that had just been donated to the city. She formed a nonprofit group, Friends of El Corazón, to bring the dream of El Corazón, a park in the heart of the city, to reality.

In 2002, she was a key part of the community group that collected enough signatures to place "El Corazón" on the ballot. It narrowly lost but led to a City Council citizen's committee. The City Council eventually approved the plan for El Corazón.

Today El Corazón has 22 soccer fields, a senior center, aquatics center, and a plan for the first of nine parks on site. Park 1 includes additional fields, pickle ball, tennis and basketball courts, a dog park, pump track, and open green spaces. The plan is close to being fully funded.

“Those of us who work with Diane are continually impressed by her big picture thinking while nailing down the smallest detail. She is truly remarkable. ... I have worked with her for around 20 years now and she never stops pushing the work forward,” said Joan Bockman, president of the nonprofit Friends of El Corazon.

Nygaard has been working with the San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians for years to try to save the Buena Vista Creek Valley, which is now the Buena Vista Creek Ecological Reserve.

“I was inspired by a traditional healing ceremony held by local tribal spiritual leaders in the Buena Vista Creek Valley. That connected our efforts to generations of Native Americans who have lived in and cared for this valley. Often we don’t know what really makes the difference in our work. But in the case of saving this valley, I believe it started with that healing ceremony,” Nygaard said.

Working together with the community, Preserve Calavera and the SLR Mission Band of Indians were able to stop the destruction of El Salto Falls, a designated sacred site.

“Of course you don’t just ‘save’ an area once. It is a long term effort to protect it from intentional vandalism, polluted run-off, and human carelessness,” Nygaard said.

“From countless meetings with officials, public outreach, collaborations to getting dirty planting natives at our restoration sites, her tireless efforts in the community have made a difference. She never gives up...she is dauntless....Persistence is her middle name. She is an inspiration for anyone who cares about our local biodiversity, climate issues and overall quality of life,” said Karen Merrill, board of directors secretary for Preserve Calvera.

Nygaard was one of six Volunteer of the Year nominations the Oceanside Parks and Recreation Department received. A committee of Parks and Recreation commissioners selected her.

Oceanside Mayor Esther Sanchez presented Nygaard with a proclamation at a volunteer recognition luncheon Oct. 30 at the Oceanside Senior Center.

“Diane, newly retired from her career, began a legacy of volunteerism that has forever improved the quality of life for all Oceanside residents, actively addressing climate change, environmental issues and impacts of development, as well as advocating for the preservation and expansion of green space, farms, and parks and recreation for our city’s diverse community,” the Proclamation said.

When asked what she liked most about her volunteer work, Nygaard talked about “hands-on work where you can see the results of your labor.”

“Last month at one of our restoration sites we found the first lupine in bloom, from seedballs we planted last year. We can now actually sit under some of the oak trees we planted back in 2004,” Nygaard said.



Linda McIntosh