

In 1996, I moved to a new house that was about a mile north of my old house in Altadena. The new house was a dream for a nature-lover, like me, as the place bordered the Angeles National Forest at the end of a long cul-de-sac. In the middle of this street was (and is) a large open space. I later found out that this parcel was a corner cut out of a 40-acre parcel otherwise owned by the National Forest system. This short move to a new house was fateful in many ways, one of which being that it led to the formation of the Arroyos & Foothills Conservancy.

We moved into our new house in December. Shortly after moving in, I heard a cat fight in the middle of a clear, cold winter day. After a few seconds, I did a second take – what are cats fighting about in the middle of the day? - and ran up the hill towards the noise. By the time I got there, the noise had stopped. I saw a large bobcat swaggering up the canyon and a disgruntled bobcat<sup>1</sup> in the sycamore tree. Catfight? Love? In the spring, I encountered a curious and playful bobcat kitten so, apparently, it was bobcat love. Wow!

Over that first year, we met our new neighbors. Coyotes, bobcats, black bear, mule deer, and grey foxes were the larger mammals that frequented our house. Later, when we got a trail camera, we captured video of the mountain lion who called our neighborhood its own. We also learned to live with native velvet oak ants, carpenter bees, screech and great horned owls, Cooper's Hawks, opossums, striped skunks, and many more birds and smaller mammals. But frequently, we saw a bobcat sitting in the large open space, hunting for ground squirrels, rabbits, and likely, the big mountain pigeons.

The land was beautiful, home to massive coast live oaks, elderberries, native ryegrass, black sage, laurel sumac, and many other chaparral and sage scrub plants. Predators were attracted by the deer, birds, and rodents that lived on the land. A trail crossed through the open space from Alzada up onto Chaney Trail, giving access to the Altadena Crest Trail and the Angeles Forest. The remains of a small rock house tucked back into a ravine sparked the imaginations of generations of children.

We got to know our human neighbors, too, and began making friends. Then, in 1998, aerial survey markers appeared on Alzada Road and Chaney Trail. The neighbors were concerned. Someone made phone calls and we found that the owners of these 15-acres of wild land had put the property on the market for development. We were alarmed.

Not too long before, the fight to preserve the old La Vina Sanatorium at the top of Lincoln Avenue as open space had been lost. Today, a gated community occupies what were wide open spaces and wildlife habitat. Our neighbors had reason to be alarmed about the prospect of development on our street, which lies within the Angeles National Forest. We knew that we had to save this property from development. But how?

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<sup>1</sup> My apologies for anthropomorphizing about those bobcats but I'm just telling it the way I saw things.

The fight for the La Vina property was waged with the County Board of Supervisors and in courtrooms. In the end, the owners were granted the permits to build. I had long been a supporter of the land trust movement, sending checks in to The Nature Conservancy. Why couldn't we buy this land instead?

But I was a busy professional with two small children, finishing up a doctoral degree, and working full-time. I didn't have time. Two things changed the equation, for me. First, there were other people who thought as I did. I thought that we needed to be about more than just one property if we were going to save land. Others agreed. But I needed another few pushes to radically change my life.

One day I read a story in the Pasadena Star-News about huge rockfall in Rubio Canyon. I looked up the woman quoted in the article and called her. Astrid Ellersieck answered and after a short conversation, she said, "let's do it!" Astrid was a veteran of movements and nonprofits and a woman of action. She and her husband Heinz lived on the edge of Rubio Canyon, on the east side of Altadena. She was not afraid of starting another organization in the last years of her life (indeed, we only had Astrid for three years as she passed away in 2002). Her catch phrase was always, "just do it!"

And one day as we were driving down the road to home, our young daughter asked what would happen to the bobcats when they built the houses? It broke my heart when my husband said they wouldn't have a home there anymore. I no longer remember which conversation happened first, but these two people – Astrid and my daughter – were the keys that made me willing to upend my life to start a land trust.

And so, in 1999 I found myself in meetings at either Astrid's or Lori Paul's house, talking about forming a land trust. The incorporators were Astrid, Lori, and me. Dianne Walters, a planner who lived on the east side of Altadena joined the first board. We invited Paul Ayers, a Glendale attorney, but he declined, citing the need to have someone who could protect land through lawsuits. Later Robert Staehle joined the board. We were mentored by Ann Croissant of the San Gabriel Mountains Regional Conservancy. Our name was Altadena Foothills Conservancy.

Right away we had work to do. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and Trust for Public Lands both wanted priority project lists for Altadena. The County was asking for nominations for Significant Ecological Area status. And then-State Senator Adam Schiff was writing a bill, SB 1455, to expand representation on the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Advisory Committee. We asked and he included a seat for unincorporated LA County, to be shared by La Crescenta and Altadena. We attended meetings of national, regional, and local groups focused on land conservation. We were all motivated by the oft-repeated belief that we had at most ten years to save America's last best places.

That first year set the stage for the new organization. It probably won't be surprising to hear that our top three priority properties have all been preserved: Millard Canyon, Rubio

Canyon, and those 15-acres on Alzada and Chaney Trail (purchased at our behest by Trust for Public Lands and turned over to become part of the Angeles National Forest). And a portion of Altadena's foothills were eventually added to the County's Significant Ecological Areas list.

By 2006, however, AFC had only been successful in preserving 16.5 acres in Altadena. The Millard Canyon property had been lost in a very disappointing probate auction and Rubio Canyon had been sold by a seller unwilling to wait for us to raise funds. We had turned our eye towards environmental education, completing a historically accurate short film called "Eaton's Water," and restoration, building a pocket park at the corner of Marengo Avenue and Woodbury, bordering a low-income neighborhood in Pasadena.

But what about land preservation? I felt stuck. It seemed that that the all-volunteer model wasn't getting us where we needed to be. I had been president/CEO for seven years and was thinking about who would replace me someday.

Our idea to focus on Altadena had been made in an era when new land trusts were popping up all over and we wanted to focus just on our small piece of the front range of the San Gabriels. Now that things had settled down, we could see a need for a land trust with a wider focus. People in Pasadena were agitating around open space and I joined their group, meeting every other week for a year to figure out what they were going to do (in the end, they focused on influencing the writing of Pasadena's open space and conservation elements of the General Plan). We met with many community members and a pro bono consultant.

On April 18, 2009, the board resolved to change the name and mission statement. Focusing on conserving lands from Pasadena and Altadena on the east to the western Verdugo Mountains, we resolved to "protect natural open spaces, before they are gone..." We filed papers with California, becoming the Arroyos & Foothills Conservancy. We had already expanded our board beyond Altadena residents to include Marie Barrie of La Canada Flintridge, Tim Wendler and John Howell of Pasadena, and Marc Stirdivant of Glendale. Also in 2009, we received a generous donation from Ninarose Mayer, which allowed us to think about hiring our first executive director. After a nationwide search, we found our new ED right under our noses – board member John Howell decided it was his calling to take on AFC.

Mission accomplished, for me. I had one more proud moment; in 2010, I signed the papers for the first of our purchases to preserve Rubio Canyon. I felt chills signing those papers, knowing that in doing so I was closing a loop started in 1999 when I read that article and cold-called Astrid Eilersieck. After twelve years of serving as president/CEO, I handed the reins of AFC to Tim Wendler in 2011. I remained on the board for one more year until my term ended in 2012. I stepped off the board knowing that it was in good hands. Chaney Trail, Rubio, Rosemont, Millard, Cottonwood, and more are names for wildlands preserved for all time, all because a small group of committed people believed they could change the world, or at least our corner of it.

----Nancy L.C. Steele