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Priscilla Stuckey and Sapphire take a walk along Butters Canyon.

The Last Wild Canyon A Meeting with Priscilla Stuckey of the Butters Land Trust

BY MEREDITH FLORIAN

As a child in the early 1960s, I was taught to love nature by a roaring, unpredictable creek and its myriad creatures we were fortunate to have in our backyard. It is long since gone—no more multitudes of tiny striped frogs for kids to catch and release, no more herds of baby toads making the patio inaccessible in spring, no more fruit tree-lined banks. Only a thin strip of cement remains—a culvert to prevent flooding. Perhaps if an energetic activist had taken up the cause, this watershed area would have been preserved

rather than enslaved. Fortunately, in Oakland we have Priscilla Stuckey, president of the Butters Land Trust, and a varied board of enthusiastic volunteers. Their mission is to preserve Butters Canyon, a critical part of the Peralta Creek watershed located off Joaquin Miller and one of the last remaining above-ground creeks and canyons in Oakland.

I spoke with her on a recent evening in her cozy Butters Canyon home overlooking the Bay. Ms. Stuckey, an editor and writer, was born in a small town in northwest Ohio. A Mennonite by birth,

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she believes that working for social justice is her birthright. After moving to Oakland to attend graduate school in the fall of 1994, she quickly found her cause when she rented a small apartment in the Butters Canyon area. She fell in love with the canyon and eventually moved into her present home in 1998 with her husband, Jim.

Before the Stuckeys moved in, the previous owners had

warned them that they would find tires or other "large items" in the creek. They found more debris than expected and organized a group of volunteers to clean it up. In the fall of 2000, Ms. Stuckey became involved with the Friends of the Last Wild Canyon. But since the surrounding creek land was privately owned, she realized that the only way to preserve it was to form a land trust, a private nonprofit organization empowered to preserve natural resources. Her organization focuses on preserving a delicious half-mile stretch of canyon with a seasonal creek extending from Robinson to Butters Drive.

As we sat on the floor of her living room studying a map of the Oakland watershed, I asked her how a land trust is developed. "The easy part is filing papers with the Secretary of State." The succeeding steps are arduous and complicated. As required, Butters Land Trust currently has a board, but they would like to increase

their members beyond five in order to increase their resources and their diversity. "We need city business people and financial advisors."

All financial contributions to the trust are carefully scrutinized. The contributions must be broadly funded in order to maintain their status. "All of the donations cannot come from four or five people." The organization is currently locating its fundraising campaign on a fifth of an acre on Butters that was almost sold to a developer last March. When the deal fell through, Ms. Stuckey and her neighbors raised \$50,000 towards the purchase of the property. They are hoping to be granted an additional \$25,000 from a private foundation.

While rescuing plots from developers is critical, making agreements with existing owners of green areas is equally important. Hence, Butters Land Trust will attempt to establish "conservation easements" with neighbors. As Ms. Stuckey explains, conservation easements are a legal agreement between a landowner and the land trust to protect natural resources. The landowner determines the area and the requirements, "usually not to develop a certain part of the land, although the agreement can be more specific." The conservation easement is then written into the title of the land forever.

With a conservation easement in place, property values decline somewhat since



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development potential has been eliminated. Because of the increasing desire in the Bay Area for "monster homes," I asked Ms. Stuckey what might motivate owners to be so generous. She explained that an owner can receive a large tax deduction after the property is reappraised. "If your property is worth \$500,000 before the easement, it may be now worth only \$400,000, so you could receive a \$100,000 tax deduction." The hope is also that people who already live in the area for its wilderness gifts of wildflowers and birds will be altruistic and want others to enjoy it too.

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Ms. Stuckey, who has created an ambitious Web site to share the goals, strategies, and projects of the land trust, believes that outreach to all Oaklanders, especially children in the flatlands, is central to the project's vision. "We are united by geography. The creeks run from the hills to the flatlands. We need to get kids in touch with natural environments. We need to instill hope in children and empower them."

Richardson, an educator and creek activist, often takes children on excursions in nature so that they can learn to appreciate a world outside of their often insulated communities.

Ms. Stuckey believes that we can all benefit by finding solace in nature. "After September 11, I spent more and more time on the land trust. I realized that even though we were at war, it didn't stop the growth of flowers or trees." She envisions a time when the canyon could become a regional recreation area for all, with multiuse trails for hikers and cyclists. "There is lots of money available for trails, but first we have to have the land."

Finally, I asked this deeply intelligent and gentle activist what we as citizens could do to help. "Don't litter. Go to commercial car washes—they can prevent the suds from draining into the watershed. And appreciate animals."

If you would like to learn more about how you can help preserve the Butters Canyon or be connected to related local environmental issues, visit their Web site (www.butterslandtrust.org) or phone Ms. Stuckey at 482-2496. ♦