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MY TURN

Peninsula's hidden gems well worth discovering

More than 20 years ago, while living in Torrance, I stumbled upon the McBride Trail and fell in love with the Peninsula's open space. Soon afterward, my then 3-year-old daughter and I began participating in the free monthly nature walks. My daughter would always stand closest to the walk leaders, hanging onto their every word.



Cindy Ayikama
Contributing writer

Through these walks, I discovered the Peninsula's hidden gems: its nature preserves and trails. And through the knowledgeable and engaging walk leaders, the area came alive. I became aware of the plants and wildlife that inhabited this place long before we arrived. I found

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myself walking the trails and feeling so much more connected to everything I saw.

I knew that the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy was behind the preservation and restoration of this open space.

I asked myself: how could I continue receiving so much from our natural areas and not begin giving back? I attended a volunteer orientation and heard about the many ways to get involved.

I decided to start as a volunteer walking the trails to report any erosion or habitat issues in the Filiorum Reserve, part of 1,600 acres preserved by the Conservancy since 1988. I also became a third-grade program docent, helping with the student naturalist program that goes to 36 schools in the South Bay. This was a program all three of my kids went through.

I remember how excited they were to learn how to identify native plant species in the wild and know why protecting them is so important

for threatened animals like the Palos Verdes blue butterfly or the California gnatcatcher bird which depend on them.

Then in January I came full circle when I began coordinating the same nature walk program that first introduced me to the Peninsula's natural lands so many years ago.

Volunteering has been a joy, and not nearly as difficult as I imagined because of the excellent training and support I received. For monitoring the trails, other long-time volunteers took me out on training hikes to show me what to look for and how to record my findings. They showed me how to look for maintenance needs on the trails and how to report them to staff.

I was always amazed at how quickly the trail crews addressed reported concerns, often by my next monthly walk. I feel I am truly making a difference for the community. Quarterly meetings by staff let us see the impact of our work and how our data helps to inform future restoration projects.

For the third grade naturalist program, in addition to the training and shadowing of other do-



COURTESY OF CINDY AKIYAMA

Cindy Akiyama educates young students about the foliage and wildlife that thrive near the local trails. Akiyama, a third-grade program docent, helps with the student naturalist program that covers 36 schools in the South Bay.

cents, I received ready-to-use lesson plans full of wonderful, hands-on learning materials and artifacts that children enjoy and make volunteering easy and fun.

And it truly is fun to share my love of nature with young people. It's great to be called a "rock star" by kids who enthusiastically look forward to touching real raccoon, skunk, and fox pelts; learning to identify native plants and their uses; and figuring out what nocturnal animals may have been in the area by looking at tracks, scat, fur,

and other evidence.

Our capstone event with each school is a highly anticipated field trip to one of our local nature preserves, including hands-on science-based activities at multiple stations along the trails that never fail to delight and inspire both students and parent volunteers. In the end, I feel I have given these young people a lifelong appreciation of nature. How awesome is that!

My most recent role as coordinator of the Conservancy's monthly nature walks has been par-

ticularly rewarding as I work with and learn from the team of dedicated walk leaders, most of whom have been leading walks for over twenty years.

It is wonderful to introduce visitors and local residents to our nature preserves and share facts about the people, wildlife, and plants of the area. Many are surprised to hear stories about familiar South Bay names like Dominguez, Sepulveda, and Bixby, who were once major landowners with a tremendous impact on this area.

I get a big smile from people's reactions to discovering that our fragrant California sagebrush was the original "cowboy cologne"; finding out that a refreshing lemon water can be made with the tartly coated bright red seeds on the lemonade berry bush; and realizing that the beach-like sand found 1,000 feet above sea level is a reminder that Palos Verdes was once an island that rose slowly over millions of years.

I wish I began volunteering sooner, not just because I feel I am repaying a debt, but because my life is richer knowing I am doing my

part to help preserve, restore, maintain, and educate people about our irreplaceable coastal lands we are so fortunate to have here in the South Bay.

To sign up or find out more about volunteering as a Docent, Volunteer Trail Watch member or Nature Walk Leader, please visit: www.pvplc.org or call (310) 541-7613.

Cindy Akiyama lives in Rolling Hills Estates with her husband of 39 years. They have lived in the South Bay since 1990 and recently became "empty-nesters" as the youngest of their three children just left for his first year of college. An engineer and management consultant by background, Cindy has found fulfillment in introducing others to the beauty and wonder of nature.

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