



MOTHER NATURE

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Meet a South Bay veterinarian who moonlights as protector of the wildlife in her own backyard.

In the backyard of Cassie Jones' lovely home located in the hills of Rancho Palos Verdes sits a generous fig tree, abundant with a seemingly endless supply of perfectly ripe fruit. Cassie, who sits on the board of directors as the executive vice president of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy (PVPLC), graciously offers her figs to houseguests as well as clever neighborhood critters. Cassie's homegrown fruits have even made an appearance at one of the PVPLC's popular Pastoral events. ➤➤

This year's Pastoral event, which takes place on Sunday, October 18 at Terranea Resort, "is a fundraiser and a friend-raiser in celebration of preserving the land on the peninsula," Cassie explains. The 200-person outdoor dinner—"that Terranea has been gracious enough to sponsor," Cassie adds—will serve food donated by the Torrance Whole Foods Market and prepared by Terranea's executive chef, Bernard Ibarra. Patrons of the dinner will also enjoy an assortment of locally grown wines.

Originally founded by Bill Ailor in 1988, the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy is committed to maintaining the preservation of untouched open spaces and native wildlife. In cooperation with the cities of Rancho Palos Verdes, Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates and San Pedro, the PVPLC manages 1,600 acres of land located on the

Palos Verdes Peninsula. With roughly 25 years as a member—four of those years as a board member—Cassie's involvement with the organization was initially inspired by her own innate appreciation for the outdoors and a desire to preserve the open spaces she loves.

"Throughout Southern California we're seeing more traffic, more congestion and more people—which is one of the reasons I've been so involved with the PVPLC," Cassie says. "I like preserving open space for future generations to enjoy. If we can keep the hills green and full of [their native] animals, that's best for us all."

Of course preserving open spaces in Southern California doesn't come without its own set of challenges. "At different times there are different problems," Cassie explains. "Initially we had to acquire the



land, but now we have the responsibility of managing it." Which often means managing how people are enjoying the space.

"Keeping people on trails that sometimes no longer look like trails is a challenge," she continues. And the conditions caused by the drought have not helped.

"It's been really bleak out there because it's been so dry," she explains. "But that's the beauty and the benefit of the native plants that we're planting ... they can survive the droughts and with the next rain expand and blossom. It's going to be gorgeous."

Until then, what may look like a sparse piece of land could actually be an area with potential new growth under the soil—an important thing to remember when hiking with kids, dogs or while riding horses. "Dogs love to be off-leash, but there are problems with that," Cassie notes.

Not only could they injure themselves, they could also scare the native animals as well as "beneficial bugs, snakes and butterflies," she explains. "Keeping them on the leash is best."

Now would probably be a good time to mention that this advice is not only coming from a PVPLC ambassador but from your local vet. As the owner of the Point Vicente Animal Hospital, Cassie has been a doctor of veterinary medicine since 1988, with her own clinic since 2001.

"I never thought I would own my own practice," Cassie notes. "I was living in the South Bay and working in Santa Monica—you can imagine the traffic—and I kept driving by this closed animal hospital. At one point I thought, 'If you worked here, you'd be at work by now.'"

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After reopening the closed animal hospital in 2001 and transitioning the space into her own clinic, many of the patients from the previous hospital returned. Cassie went from being the only vet to being one of four with a staff of 25.

In 2011 Cassie and her team moved their practice from their original Rancho Palos Verdes location. "We built our own building," she says, which is now located on Palos Verdes Drive West.

There, Cassie and her team treat a variety of animals including snakes, birds, rabbits, guinea pigs and hamsters. "My motto, and people always laugh when I say this, is no horses, no monkeys and no venomous snakes," Cassie says. "I've even treated a few bugs and a fish or two, but mostly dogs and cats."

When asked if she brings her work home with her, Cassie laughs and says, "My husband would probably say I bring it home sometimes," which in Cassie's case may mean bringing home an animal or two. Currently Cassie's household includes two cats named Miller Moth and Flea and two tortoises named Pyramus and Thisbe.

Flea, whom she describes as her "little black kitty who hops like a flea," and Miller Moth were named by Cassie, but Pyramus and Thisbe had their names before taking up residence with the good

doctor. "They're older than I am. They belonged to a client who was in her 80s with kids in their 60s. She wanted them to go to someone younger because they live a long time, and I was in my 30s," Cassie explains.

The California desert tortoises, which are a protected species, "are registered," Cassie notes. "You're not supposed to take them out of the wild, but they were born in captivity years ago." Today they live a happy little life among the native plants and well-tended garden veggies growing throughout Cassie's yard.

As a wife, doting animal lover and the owner of a growing business, it's hard to imagine how Cassie finds the time to participate with the PVPLC, especially at the level she does. Initially, as a member, it was about "giving support, showing up and helping to pull weeds," Cassie says. "You can be a financial supporter too, donating money—that's always important. But time is money too. The volunteers put in an incredible amount of hours, and it's very valuable to us."

In regard to her transition from a member to a board member, Cassie says it all came down to a simple request. "I was asked," she explains. "I was always a supporter, and finally someone asked me if I'd like to be a board member. I think that's what it takes. You have to ask ... you'd be surprised who says yes."

With 15 current members, the PVPLC board meets throughout the year, with committee meetings throughout the month. But in addition to their contributions to the organization through their work on the board, "behind the scenes many of the members are also accountants or attorneys who have put in a lot of pro bono time," says Cassie. "We don't rely on that," she continues, but it's good to have.

"We've also had members in the education field who have helped us with our Third-Grade Naturalist Program," Cassie adds. The 20-year program, as described by pvplc.org, is a "four-part, in-class educational unit covering local ecology, native plants, geology, history, Native American culture, mammals, reptiles, birds and insects." Through awareness and appreciation, kids learn to responsibly enjoy and preserve their natural environments—an invaluable lesson for future generations.

In addition to the Third-Grade Naturalist Program, there are many ways one can participate as a volunteer for the PVPLC, including joining the Trail Crew, working at the San Pedro Native Plant Nursery, or as an Adopt-a-Plot volunteer. In exchange, volunteers are "able to enjoy the preserve by leading a nature hike or growing plants in the nursery," Cassie says. "For some people it becomes a great hobby, even a great passion."

Strolling around Cassie's property, it's clear to see how her passion and dedication to the PVPLC reflect on her own surroundings. With a front yard filled with 95% indigenous plants, pulling up to Cassie's house is like getting a firsthand look at the beauty and benefit of landscaping with native vegetation.

"They reduce your water use and attract butterflies and birds," she notes. And it's a landscaping method that's growing in popularity. "As you drive around the neighborhood, you see that people are taking out their grass. Also native plant sales are on the rise."

As for the house itself, each large window in the main living space boasts incredible views. The entrance and walkways are bright and airy, and art is found on every wall—including a number of pieces donated by local artists and purchased by Cassie at PVPLC fundraising events. The overall feel of the home is welcoming and unique.

"We've done a lot to the house, but just a step at a time," Cassie says, "You have to have a vision."

Right now, Cassie's vision is focused on October's upcoming Pastoral, continuing the quality care given to her patients at the Point Vicente Animal Hospital and enjoying her own preserved sanctuary on the Portuguese Bend. ●