

POINT REYES LIGHT



Jean Berensmeier, a Valley force, dies at 90

By Sam Mondros
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Jean Yurosovich Berensmeier, who spent six decades advocating for the protection of the San Geronimo Valley's open spaces while supporting and enriching its human community, died in her sleep on March 15. She was 90 years old.

Jean founded the San Geronimo Valley Planning Group, the San Geronimo Community Center and the Wilderness Way Environmental Center. A staunch conservationist, her stick-to-itiveness changed the landscape to reflect values now enshrined in the valley's strongest institutions.

"Jean was an advocate of preserving the San Geronimo Valley in perpetuity for future generations," her son, Paul, said. "My mom would say to me, 'The fish and the trees, they don't have a voice. And when you're at a meeting discussing development or building on ridges or reserving land on the creeks, it is our responsibility to speak on their behalf.'"

Jean was born to a Serbo-Croatian family in Livermore during the Great Depression. Her parents, Lewis and Helen, could not afford to support two children, so at age 4, Jean was sent to live with her grandparents while her baby brother stayed at home.

Jean's grandparents lived in Ruth, Nevada, a company town occupied by the workers of an adjacent copper mine. Neither of her grandparents spoke English, so Jean learned to speak their language. She developed a love of her ancestry through the Balkan nursery rhymes her grandmother sang to her.

Although there were no children to play with, Jean wasn't lonely. She spent her mornings sitting on the fence in front of her house watching steam trains circle the colossal pit before carrying their copper ore eight miles west to Ely. Dozens of anthills crowded her backyard, and Jean spent afternoons observing the ants' tireless cooperation in their quest to build a community.

"They were my instructors, my teachers," Jean said in an interview for the Marin's Women Hall of Fame. "They never gave up! That has been a tenet in my life."

One day, as she wandered out to the anthills, she noticed a large, orange rock in the sand. Puzzled by its sudden appearance, Jean approached it. In a moment of spiritual merger, she felt herself become one with the boulder. The experience forged a connection with the earth that would last a lifetime.

“I believe that as my life evolved, that my love and caring of the environment goes back to the ants and that rock,” she wrote in the 2017 San Geronimo Valley Community Guide.

Jean’s parents moved around California with her younger brother during the Depression, trying their best to stay afloat while Jean lived with her grandparents. Eventually, her parents made it to Ely, where her father worked as a miner during the day and studied to become an electrician at night. When he earned his license, the family moved to Richmond, where he would work on Liberty ships after the United States joined the Allied powers.

Jean said that growing up in Richmond had a profound influence on her, introducing her to the racial and ethnic diversity America had to offer. Though her father had just a fourth-grade education, his solutions-oriented mindset taught Jean perseverance and listening.

“Wherever we went, neighbors knew they could go see Lou,” Jean said of her father in a 2012 oral history for the Marin County Free Library. “Even if he hadn’t seen that problem before, he could come up with a solution—that was his legacy to me.”

Jean attended San Francisco State University, where she majored in physical education and minored in art. During her orientation ceremony, a tall boy in a letterman jacket walked up the aisle and sat behind her. He began waxing poetic to a friend about the themes of a play he’d seen at a local theater. Jean was impressed that the jock who had walked past her was a theater buff, and she turned around and said, “You sure don’t look like the kind of guy who would say something like that.” Fred “Lee” Berensmeier later said he spent the whole day trying to figure out what that meant and who she even was. The two became fast friends, betting on who could get better grades and sharing their love of athletics and the arts.

Jean was the captain of the fencing team, specializing in French foil fencing. In her senior year, a Hungarian Olympic gold medalist in saber fencing stepped in as coach. George Piller taught rigorous lessons on the fifth floor of California Hall to the area’s most promising fencers. Since he spoke almost no English, his interactions consisted of short, shouted words. He was tall, thin, very gentlemanly, highly respected and smart. Jean said she had to learn fencing all over again, and when she erred in technique, he would shout, “No! Not French—Hungarian!”

She spent late nights trying to decipher his methods and went so far as to bring an interpreter with her to their practices. The interpreter looked at her and repeated what he heard: “Your technique is good, but unless you move at the right time and choose the right strategy, you will not win a point—let alone the bout.”

From this experience came Jean’s “three T’s”—technique, timing and tactics—that she relied on when it came to problem solving.

In the early 1950s, freshly graduated, Jean and Lee took jobs at Forest Farm Summer Camp in Forest Knolls, she as the art counselor and he as a horse wrangler. The camp was revolutionary for being the first multiracial summer camp west of the Mississippi. Jean would later rise to art director before the camp was shuttered in 1977.

“We did a program called ‘Tumbleweeds’ where we drove children to special places for two weeks where we would camp, hike, raft, canoe, and look for wildlife, petroglyphs and special nature areas,” Lee told the Light.

For Jean and Lee, the valley echoed the ruggedness of Nevada and the Catskill Mountains, where Lee grew up.

Jean and Lee were living in San Francisco when they married in 1956. Jean worked at a San Mateo community college, where her physical education classes included modern dance,

aerobics, weight training, backpacking and biking. She also coached a fencing team. She was one of three women on a staff of primarily World War II veterans, and though she described the environment as misogynistic and intimidating, she pushed for the integration of weight training and fencing programs.

One day, after a staff meeting, one of the men followed Jean and cornered her, trying to push her against the wall. Jean stood her ground. Toe to toe, Jean thought to herself, "He's either going to have to push me over or back off." He backed off. "That was a real significant moment for me, my backbone came from [my father] there," Jean said in an interview.

In 1962, Jean gave birth to Paul, and a year later, the family moved into a small home on the slopes of Mount Barnabe where Jean would spend the rest of her life.

At a meeting in 1968, the Lagunitas School board shared plans to destroy a building to build a sheriff's substation, and Jean was in attendance. She stood up and declared that she would lie down in front of the bulldozer, pointing out the building's potential as a learning center. She brought in her father, who examined the redwood beams and Maurice Del Mue's 15-foot 1934 mural, "Rural Landscape," that covered one wall. Jean suggested that the building be made into a community center and an art hub for the students; plenty of families agreed, and the board followed.

It was Jean's first major success in local politics. She leased the building from the county on a \$1-a-year agreement and founded the San Geronimo Valley Arts Center. With help from local art teachers, she established an afterschool program where kids played music, painted and worked with clay and leather. At the end of the year, Jean hired a lawyer who helped the center incorporate as a community center.

These days, the San Geronimo Valley Community Center has a \$1.8 million budget and over 20 employees who oversee diverse programs, from health and social services to education and the arts.

"She was an absolute force of nature, and whether it was an educational, environmental or philanthropy program, you knew when she had her hands on a project. There were no loose ends," her friend Richard Sloan said.

For its first 20 years, the community center was an all-volunteer organization in which Jean was a constant force. After the center received funds from the Buck Trust, it was able to offer paid positions like that of executive director. Jean had observed Dave Cort's dedication to the community and consistent presence at meetings, and she hired him in 1991. As he was getting ready for his first day, she invited him over for coffee.

"I went for what I thought was a quick chat and I ended up staying at her house for six hours, with 20 pages of notes," Dave said. "She looked at me and said, 'Good luck!' I was so overwhelmed by it, I drove my car straight off her driveway and into the creek."

Jean's activism stepped up a level in 1972, when a master plan created by county staff 10 years earlier was beginning to take shape. The plan outlined a transformation of West Marin, with 5,000 new homes and 20,000 new residents envisioned on the valley's ridgelines. There would be shopping malls and a hospital with a helipad and Sir Francis Drake would become a four-lane highway.

Jean formed the ad-hoc San Geronimo Valley Planning Group to oppose the plan. "The squeeze play is on," Jean told the Light in September 1974. "And we're not ready!"

The group fought tooth and nail to garner community support. At the time, two county supervisors backed the plan and two opposed it. Gary Giacomini, a former Lagunitas School trustee, was running for the District Four seat, and the group promised its allegiance to him if he voted against the plan. Instead, they argued, a new plan should be developed in coordination with the community.

Five years later, supervisors approved the valley's own community plan, which set boundaries around each of the four villages to protect the ridges, streams and other natural resources. Jean served on the Marin County Parks and Open Space Commission from 1977 through 1997, helping acquire the Roy's Redwoods, Maurice Thorner, Gary Giacomini and French Ranch Open Space Preserves, which together total 2,600 acres. Despite the constant meetings and incessant slog through bureaucracy, Jean always returned home with a smile and a laugh that could light up a room, Paul said.

"She had a big presence but not a big ego, because what she did wasn't for herself, it was for others," Paul's wife, Tina Spooner-Whyte, said.

After Jean retired from teaching in San Mateo in 1993, she wanted to continue her career in a local, outdoor environment. Paul had recently left a university coaching job for Outward Bound, and with Lee heading into retirement, the three banded together in 2000 to create a community center-sponsored afterschool outdoor education program. Montessori, Waldorf and Open Classroom students went on forays to the nearby preserves to learn about local habitats and species. A year later, the program incorporated as its own nonprofit under the name Wilderness Way, and it soon acquired two prefabricated buildings on the school campus. "Without a clear understanding of the three T's, I would never have saved the old school building from being destroyed, or leased the building that became the community center, or formed the planning group, or been successful in participating in the acquisition of the valley's open space preserves, or acquired the Wilderness Way building," Jean said.

A public tribute for Jean is planned for Memorial Day weekend at the community center, followed by a celebration of life at Roy's Redwoods.