

VILLAGE INTERVIEW: *Maria Sutherland*

BY BARBARA LIVINGSTON

“I don’t know about you, but I like oxygen”



Courtesy of Friends of Carmel Forest

Maria Sutherland and friends renew Carmel's forest.

Buddy barked his signature greeting as Maria Sutherland, President of Friends of Carmel Forest (carmelforest.org), came through the gate of “green gardens.” As we drank our tea – appropriately enough, under majestic pines – Maria answered some questions.

Q: Tell our readers a little about yourself.

I was born in Carmel in the mid-1960s. My beatnik parents actually left after the Monterey Pop Festival (in 1967) because they thought the world was going to hell in a hand basket. All my life, when asked where I was born, people would sing the praises of Carmel and its beauty. After spending time on the East Coast and in France, it was natural to return. I currently work in communications design – web sites, social media and public relations – for arguably the coolest people in town.

Q: How did you become interested in helping to protect, preserve and enhance Carmel’s forest?

While living in Greenwich Village, there was one tree in front of my building. I was on the fifth floor and was lucky enough to look into the foliage. What a difference

that tree made! Every fall, when the leaves fell, the psychological effects of the cold concrete were palpable. I vowed then that wherever I lived, I would work to enhance my environment through the planting and protection of trees.

Q: What about the \$25,000 windfall from PG&E?

Mayor Steve Dallas secured a \$25,000 grant (from a \$1.6 million settlement) to restore the urban forest in downtown Carmel. We are currently working on a three-block test project. We hope this will become a multi-year grant and that it will inspire matching donations.

Q: Acknowledging the esthetic and economic benefits to our properties, what other value does the forest bring to our village?

I don’t know about you, but I love oxygen. There are the cooling effects and absorption of carbon dioxide, which are so needed today. Perhaps the most significant benefits have been proved by science: being in a forest setting lowers blood pressure, pulse rate and cortisol levels. It’s the reason shoppers spend more on tree-

lined streets. Trees are great for our health.

Q: Tell me about the Centennial Trees Program. Did it meet your expectations?

When our group started the Centennial (now Commemorative) Tree program, we thought it would be a win-win. Trees would be planted, funds would be raised for future projects and individuals would have a beautiful touchstone to visit. We underestimated the emotional response and how much these trees mean to people. Each tree represents a story - the joy of a wedding celebration, a family’s hope for the future, the loss of a beloved spouse. Meeting the donors and seeing how moved they are has been more fulfilling than we could have imagined.

Our commemorative trees are grown at MEarth. We plant the trees once a month, and each of our volunteers has a number of trees to monitor to ensure they’re healthy and watered. Each commemorative tree package includes: A choice of one of three species of native trees: Monterey Pine, Monterey Cypress or California Coastal Oak; a professional planting in Carmel-by-the-Sea; a historical marker with a number, year and personal dedication; monitoring for five years; marking on a map at carmelforest.org of centennial trees.

Q: As president of FCF, what are your goals?

When you live in Carmel, you are living in a park. Each public right-of-way in front of every house is a green space. I would like to see an intelligent, esthetic design approach that considers all of Carmel versus one tree-square or one street. I’d like to see that vision firmly and proudly enforced. I’d also like people to be more empathetic to our fellow organisms.

Q: Do you and your board have a sense of fulfillment?

I’ve been with the board since 2007, and president since 2014. With a (citywide) deficit of over 2,000 trees, our number one goal is to get trees into the ground and ensure they thrive. We lobbied to secure more watering, and this has recently gone into effect. In 2016, we planted 82 trees and raised \$23,500 towards future projects.

Maria, thank you.