

Other Voices
Gracie MacKenzie

August 31, 2014

SYRCL's story, from the beginning

17th Yuba River Cleanup & Restoration Day

On Saturday, Sept. 20, join SYRCL and over 500 volunteers as we embark on the 17th Annual Yuba River Cleanup & Restoration Day — together they have removed nearly 160,000 pounds of trash and recycling from the Yuba and Bear watersheds over the past 16 years!

Visit www.YubaRiver.org for more information.

At no time is the value of our South Yuba River more evident than during the summer heat, so I thought this would be a good time to share the early history of SYRCL (aka South Yuba River Citizens' League).

I have enormous respect and eternal gratitude for every volunteer, member and staff person who has ever worked for SYRCL. Their immeasurable work and dedication has indeed protected our beloved South Yuba and her watershed for 31 years!

That being said, last September someone who is often inaccurately credited with founding SYRCL was quoted in *The Union* as saying something like: "The people who started SYRCL had good intentions, but didn't really know what they were doing." On the SYRCL website, the original founders are called "a group of concerned local citizens," which is also incorrect.

Allow me to set the record straight: We were a group of committed local citizens. (There's a world of difference!) The real father of SYRCL is Dennis Barry, and I, Gracie MacKenzie, am her mother. And we definitely knew some things when we conceived and birthed her in 1983.

Here's what happened:

I worked for the Mountain Messenger when an article appeared about a proposed hydro-electric project at Hoyt's Crossing, more commonly called "Pan's Pool" or "Miner's Tunnel." My exact words at that time were: "Oh, no they're not!" Fresh out of training where I'd learned that my intentions and my word were powerful, I set an intention to organize a group whose mission would be to preserve and protect the South Yuba between Englebright and Spaulding dams.

Around that same time, Dennis Barry read that the county was proposing a feasibility study for themselves to build a hydro-power plant there. Outraged, he wrote a letter to the editor expressing his views. We'd never met, but reading his letter moved me to call and ask if he knew of anyone who was doing anything about it. He didn't, so I said "Let's do it," and we scheduled a meeting.

Dennis made a flyer and posted one at Misty Mountain, now the South Pine Café in Nevada City. Rob Sinnock had been going to the Yuba with Dennis since they were kids. They had been doing their own river clean-ups for a long time! Vince Haughey had worked several years as both a river rafting guide and a volunteer with "Friends of the River," and met Dennis when he stopped to read the poster.

We four sat in a circle for our first meeting, sharing stories and intentions, planning the next steps. Dennis and Rob would make a video; I would write copy for promo materials; Vince would get the paperwork for a petition to be filed with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission; we would gather signatures, put up posters, tell everyone and invite them to join us in our work. We knew exactly what we were doing. We had no doubt. We were starting a group that would preserve and protect the 39-mile stretch of the Yuba between Englebright and Spaulding.

Meeting in a circle, our numbers grew. The petition was successful and the projects were stopped. We needed a name and I made one up. Pronounced "circle," the acronym reflected the coming together of neighbors, committed citizens, standing for the Yuba.

As it unfolded, Dennis and I both had to shift priorities to our families when his son became ill and I found my daughter who'd been missing for 11 years. We consciously turned our "child" over to professionals who asked to adopt her, and SYRCL was nurtured by many foster parents on her way to becoming the premier river protection group celebrated today. Every one of them is my hero.

I offer this historical review not for recognition, but to shed light on a powerful concept; and to empower anyone who feels small or impotent in the face of current issues. Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

It is potent to live with intention. And in gratitude for those who came before us, and on whose shoulders we stand; as well as for those who will take up the work and carry it forward when we move on.

I invite you to stand for something. Organize. Act. Lead. You don't have to know everything it will take – just that it's possible, and that you make a difference. It is and you do.

Gracie MacKenzie lives in Grass Valley. Dennis Barry contributed to this column.

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