

Published April 25th, 2012

Moraga's Johnny Redwood Seed

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Kevin Bernie tells his story while standing near one of 300 Redwoods he planted in Moraga. Photo Andy Scheck

Arbor Day is April 27, but what's that got to do with Moraga? Just ask Kevin Bernie. Bernie's family calls him Don Quixote, but instead of tilting at windmills, he spent years planting redwood trees in the town.

Those trees are a fitting tribute, said Bernie, considering the town's original name of Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados (Ranch of the Lake of Redwoods). But why did a Saint Mary's College graduate, and businessman with a law degree invest in the future by planting 300 seedlings that can grow to 300 feet tall? "I had a thing for trees," he said. A thing, indeed.

Bernie recounted the California East Bay history of the late 1800s, when post-gold rush inhabitants nearly stripped the Berkeley hills bare of their native redwoods. He learned to love the beautiful Muir Woods redwood groves, and the "magnificent" grove in Sequoia National Park south of Yosemite. Bernie wasn't out to save the world; he only wanted to "plant the tree." And plant he did, starting with a section in front of St. Mary's Gardens, where his parents moved after he started college next door.

In 1981, he contacted the East Bay Municipal Utility District and Contra Costa County Sanitary District for approval to plant 30 Aptos Blue Redwoods along the

entrance to St. Mary's Gardens. Then he approached 124 homeowners, asking for donations to buy saplings.

Many asked him, "What's in it for you?" He simply replied, "It makes me happy."

Bernie also figured that an affluent community like Moraga would pass laws to protect the trees. It took six months, but he gained approval and funding.

The earth was so tough when the first holes were dug that Bernie stood atop the auger in order to break ground. Those trees have grown to nearly 100 feet, he said, under the watchful eye of his brother Dan, Moraga's Public Works and Parks Superintendent.

It's likely they'll continue "reaching for the stars," said Bernie, crediting his brother with keeping the saplings alive. "It's one thing to plant a seed[ling]," Bernie said, "but Dan has been able to 'stick around and water it.'"

Bernie planted 50 more trees in 1988 - the same year that two U.C. Berkeley students attempted to harvest a 15-foot redwood tree for Christmas at their fraternity house. Moraga Police caught them in the act and the pair made financial restitution for their "youthful indiscretion."

At first, it was just Bernie and friends Mike O'Brien, Kevin Humann and John Holroyd who planted trees. Later Bernie enlisted town residents, volunteers from Youth for Environmental Action (YEA) and Saint Mary's College. In 1991, Bernie and his volunteers planted 125 Aptos Blue Redwoods on the north side of St. Mary's Road near the Moraga library.

Seventy-five more trees followed in 1992 and another 20 were planted along Moraga Boulevard across from Campolindo High School in 1993. To celebrate those plantings, they held an environmental fair and music fest at Saint Mary's Redwood Amphitheater. The fair, "Redwood Rage," ran for three years.

The man who loves trees and admires John Muir and his mentor Galen Clark simply hopes that the people he's involved in the redwood plantings "drive a little slower" through the developing glade. Sounding a bit like a character from the movie Avatar, Bernie said with a smile, "The secret to long life is in the trees."

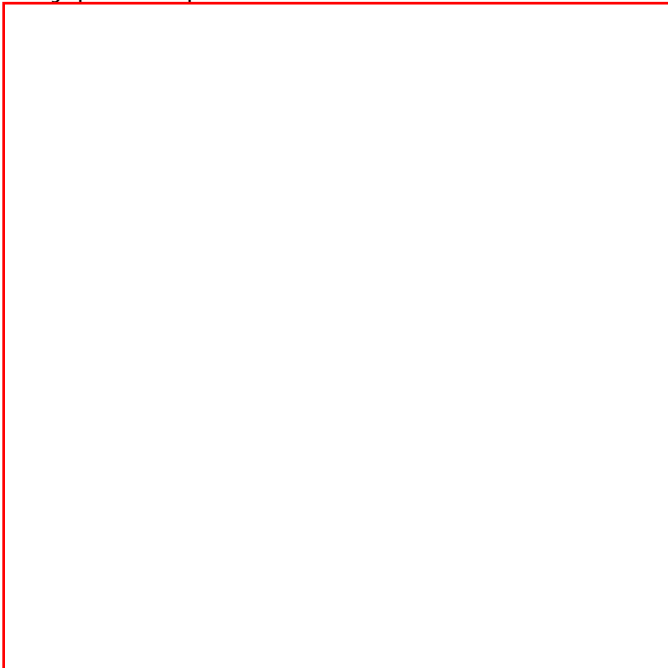


First plant. From left: Bernie, Mike O'Brien and Kevin Humann, 1981



Kevin Bernie on right Photos provided

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[back](#)

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