

For this volunteer, the future is now



JOE SCHNEIDER

Jolene Vrchota intended to wait until retirement before volunteering for the causes she supports.

But when she saw how efficiently The Nature Conservancy uses its resources, she realized the investment of a little volunteer time today could pay huge conservation dividends down the road.

“The future is now,” said Vrchota, 56. “It’s only by making time now that we’re going to provide for the future.”

Vrchota, who says her name rhymes with “Dakota,” first came in contact with The Nature Conservancy through her work as a planner in Pitkin County, Colorado.

The county wanted to purchase and preserve a ranch that would serve as an ideal boundary for Aspen, but couldn’t afford its hefty price. The Nature Conservancy bought the land and arranged to sell it back to the county at a later date.

PEOPLE IN ACTION

Two women share a passion for nature

You could say Mary Hedlin inherited her passion for nature.

And it’s no wonder. Having grown up on the Skagit Valley farm that her Danish grandparents established in the early 1900s, she had a front-row seat to many of nature’s picturesque displays. Among her fondest: The way the cabbage crops bloomed vibrant yellow against a darkened sky while alit by beams of bright sunlight.

“I feel like I live in a little slice of heaven,” says Hedlin, 53, as she gestured past the lush fields that stretch in front of an early classic family farmhouse. “I feel really lucky to have grown up here.”

Mary and her brother David Hedlin continue to run the historic family farm. David Hedlin and his wife Serena Campbell farm 400 acres of conventional and organic vegetable crops, while Mary Hedlin heads up the floral greenhouse business that her mother Elizabeth started in 1957.

“She was a patient teacher,” Hedlin recalls. Mother and daughter ran the greenhouse for more than 20 years, and Mary Hedlin took over the operation in the early 1980s.

“Our idea was to be a small business and be the best that we could be,” Hedlin says. “People need to talk. We’re able to give them that kind of time; that is not something the large retail operations can do.”

That spirit of courtesy extends to the family’s treatment of their land. Hedlin’s mother emphasized a type of “golden rule” of environmental stewardship.

“She always loved the land and she always taught us that we were to be stewards of the land,” Hedlin says.

Life on the farm also nurtured an enduring friendship between Hedlin and Sina Pearson, whose grandparents also settled in the Skagit in the early 1900s. The two women’s mothers, who were neighbors, remained lifelong friends

and shared a deep love of nature that they carried into their professional lives. Pearson’s mother, Esther, had a career as a landscape designer and Hedlin’s mother held a degree in horticulture. Both women gently fostered these same values in their children, and it is a tradition that the daughters continue today.

It has been with that quiet conviction that Hedlin has become involved with The Nature Conservancy. Her involvement includes speaking to supporters about why her family cares so deeply about preserving the “magic” during a Skagit Delta field outing last year, and often contributing labor and sharing delicacies from her family’s harvests during local events.

When asked to explain why she supports such efforts, Hedlin laughs and answers, “My goodness, why not?” —G.S.



Sina Pearson, left, and Mary Hedlin share deep roots in the Skagit Valley, as well as strong family traditions: conservation and friendship.

The Conservancy's willingness to step in and partner with a public agency made a big impact on Vrchota.

Fast forward some 20 years, after Vrchota moved to Seattle and began working as a computer programmer.

A Conservancy member, Vrchota noticed the organization's call for data entry volunteer work in its Seattle office and decided to help out. Besides the data entry work she did each week for the Conservancy's science library, Vrchota also helped develop an updated protected-lands database.

"I got my GIS (geographic information system) certification from the UW Extension and I wanted to have some hands-on experience," Vrchota explains. The database stores information about which lands are protected for conservation purposes and is among the Conservancy's most frequently used databases, used in mapping, analysis, and planning.

While working in the office, Vrchota realized there were opportunities in the field. Her outdoor work has included pulling invasive *Spartina* (cord grass) at Port Susan Bay near Stanwood and planting native vegetation on Vashon Island.

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—JOLENE VRCHOTA

Vrchota has expanded her volunteerism to other groups and locations, including Carkeek Park near her North Seattle home, and has even woven volunteering into vacations. Last September she volunteered for the Sierra Club in Cape Cod. After helping with trail work for four days, the group's organizer took the volunteers to see salt ponds and led them on in-depth explorations of the area's salt marsh ecosystem.

Vrchota highly recommends such "volunteering vacations" to others. "It's a wonderful way to experience a new place," she says.

—G.S.

... passed down from their mothers.

Although Sina Pearson no longer officially calls the Puget Sound region home, she continues to experience its rich, serene landscapes in the fabrics she designs for her New York-based textile firm.

Pearson was raised in Seattle and summered at the beach near La Conner, where her Swedish immigrant grandparents had settled in the early 1900s.

"My grandfather was the village blacksmith," Pearson says, explaining her three-generation connection to the Skagit Valley.

Pearson, 58, now lives in New York, where her company Sina Pearson Textiles is headquartered. From there Pearson designs and distributes upholstery fabrics for commercial and residential markets.

Pearson maintains close ties to the Skagit Valley, where she returns every month for one week, to the beachside cabin that is next to the property her grandparents owned.

"My brother and I had a little boat, and we would row down to nearby tide pools and go exploring," she says. "We would look at all the mussels and the sea urchins." Those memories are woven into many of Pearson's fabrics, such as her Tidepools and Coastal collections (below, center).

Pearson's parents cultivated in their children an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings.

Her father was a photographer by hobby, and her mother was a well-known landscape designer.

"Around the dinner table, we talked plants," Pearson laughs. "The two of them really taught me and my brother to appreciate this unique space."

From such appreciation grew Pearson's commitment to conservation and The Nature Conservancy. Pearson reaffirms her devotion to the Skagit Valley through an ongoing donation to the Conservancy's Washington chapter, contributing a portion of the Northwest-influenced fabric sales to the organization.

"When I was growing up it was unthinkable to have bald eagles here," she said. "Now I have them sitting in my tree. They really have come back, thanks to organizations like The Nature Conservancy."

—G.S.

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SINA PEARSON TEXTILES