

Shelli Lamb Interview: 48 Years of Changing the World

by Jenny Iyer

After nearly half a century with the Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District, Shelli Lamb retired as District Manager in spring 2025. Much has changed since she took the reins at the agency in 1984.

Q: The District has seen a ten-fold increase in population over the last seven decades to more than a half million residents today. This growth has led to large-scale conversion from agriculture and natural habitat to urban landscapes. This could have been trouble for a small government agency formed to help farmers, but instead the District grew from one employee to 22. How?

A: There are a lot of people, this is human nature, they will see roadblocks.

I've always been blessed with having a Board of Directors that supported me and our staff. We didn't see roadblocks; we saw opportunities.

I've always felt that if you tell me I can't do it, I'll find a way to do it.

In the very beginning I had an old district conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service who told me 'the first thing you've got to do is a resource inventory. You've got to know what the resource issues are. Once you determine what those issues are, then you'll be able to find the partnerships, the funding, all those things.'

It goes back to just exploring your environment, exploring your world, understanding that.

Don't think, 'I can't do it because I have no money.' We can find the partnerships. We can find the funding. We can do it if we believe in it.

Continued on page 11



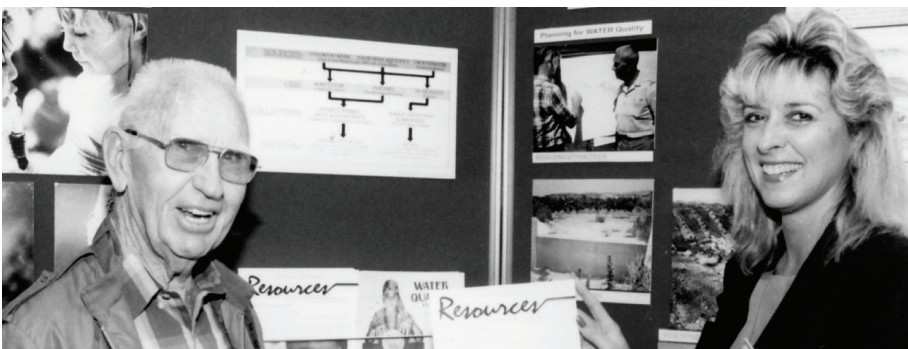
Shelli Lamb

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Meet new District Manager Kerwin Russell on page 9.

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RCRCD Board Member Stan Cooley and Shelli Lamb receive an award in 1985.

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Cultivating Conservation

Free assistance for local farmers is here!

To help local farmers feed our community more sustainably, RCRCD has hired an Agricultural Conservation Advisor thanks to the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s Urban Agriculture Grant program.

Adriana Murguia offers technical service in healthy soils management, irrigation efficiency, native plant hedgerows, agricultural easements and more.

She is also updating the “Fresh and Local” food and farm guide. To see the last edition go to www.rcrcd.org and click on “Documents and Publications” then “Fresh & Local.” Contact Adriana to be included in the guide or to become a sponsor.

Adriana also created a needs assessment for farmers in the District’s boundary.

Here’s what we’ve learned after 16 responses:

- 47% of respondents are landholders, and 33% are leasing land. Many of the farmers leasing land wanted more information on financing and land ownership.
- 27% are historically underserved farmers and ranchers.
- All grew “specialty crops” (a term that excludes major commodities such as corn, rice, cotton and wheat). Vegetables, citrus, and berries were the primary crops. Primary sources for sales included produce stands, Riverside Unified School District’s Food Hub and farmer’s markets.
- Most said they had adequate water for irrigating their crops, and half said costly water bills have led them to consider improving their irrigation systems.

For more information on our free agricultural services, to participate in the survey or get a free listing in the “Fresh and Local” guide, contact Adriana at adriana.murguia@rcrcd.org, or (951) 683-7691, ext. 212 or go to www.rcrcd.org/agricultural-support.



Agricultural Conservation Advisor Adriana Murguia inspects an avocado tree.

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Free Habitat for Pollinators

As part of RCRCD’s new 1,2,3...for the Butterflies and Bees program free native pollinator plants are available to groups or residents in RCRCD’s boundary, with a focus on helping underserved communities.

Pollinator plants can be integrated into hedgerows, field borders and buffer strips on an agricultural field, and in urban and suburban yards. Fourteen farmers and many residents have applied for the first round. Apply now to be placed on a wait list for the Winter 2025-2026 round.

More information: www.rcrcd.org/pollinator-habitat-kit



Several species of plants are included in the free pollinator habitat kits.

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RCRCD earns unique spot to help monarchs

by Jenny Iyer

In 2024 Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District Naturalist Michele Felix-Derbarmdiker was one of only four people in California selected to be part of a permitted pilot program to collect, raise, test, tag and release Western Monarchs.

Without a permit it is currently illegal in the state to handle, rear, tag or test monarchs.

On Dec. 10, 2024 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials proposed that the iconic butterfly gain protection under the Endangered Species Act as the western population has a more than 99% chance of extinction by 2080.

California's overwintering monarch count that concluded in January was the second lowest since tracking began in 1997. The peak population recorded this winter was just 9,119 butterflies. The previous three years more than 200,000 overwintering monarchs were observed each year.

Data from the pilot program will inform experts on how to best help monarchs who face hurdles such as the decline of milkweed populations, the only plants their caterpillars will eat; pesticides; disease; loss of overwintering sites; and loss of nectar plants.

The nonprofit Southwest Monarch Study (SWMS), with the backing of the Monarch Larval Monitoring Program via the Arboretum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, obtained a permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. SWMS then invited qualified individuals to join the project under their permit.

After being added to the permit in September, Felix-Derbarmdiker raised dozens of caterpillars, and tagged, tested for disease and released those that survived to adulthood.

How you can help

- Plant more native narrowleaf milkweed and native nectar plants. (See plant sale information on page 5.)
Appy for a free pollinator kit. (See page 2 for details.)
- Use less pesticides and herbicides.
- Volunteer at our Greenbelt Monarch Habitat. Contact Michele to learn more.
- If you grow non-native tropical milkweed (with yellow or red flowers) keep it trimmed back to six inches October through February to slow the spread of disease.
- Look for monarchs with blue tags like the one pictured. Report them to tag@swtag.org or follow the steps on the Southwest Monarch Study website (swmonarchs.org). Having a picture is preferred but not required.

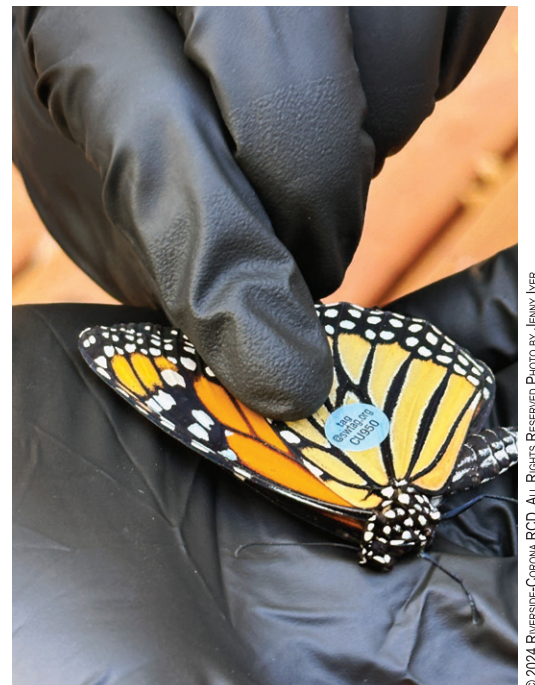
For more tips see "Steps for Success with Milkweed and Monarchs" (in English and Spanish) at www.rcrcd.org/publications-and-brochures; or contact Michele at felix-derbarmdiker@rcrcd.org.



RCRCD's Michele Felix-Derbarmdiker releases a butterfly in September 2024.



RCRCD Naturalist Michele Felix-Derbarmdiker collects monarch caterpillars from native narrow leaf milkweed at the LandUse Learning Center demonstration garden in Riverside in September.



This tagged butterfly was released in Riverside.

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You, too, can become a California Naturalist!

RCRCD offers a college-level natural history course focused on the Santa Ana River watershed from the San Bernardino Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The California Naturalist class is a hands-on certification from the Environmental Stewards program of the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR). Students must complete at least 40 hours of instruction time including field trips, presentations from experts, homework, and an 8-hour stewardship project. Graduates will have the option to receive academic units for an additional fee.

In fall 2024 RCRCD had 19 graduates of the course. Another 23 students graduated in March of this year.

While field trips vary, recent excursions have included locations such as Seven Oaks Dam in Highland, Back Bay Science Center at Newport Beach, Heaps Peak Arboretum in the San Bernardino Mountains, Ya'i Heki' Regional Indian Museum at Lake Perris and Tequesquite Solar Farm in Riverside.

The next course will be in-person, and is set for 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday nights (except Thanksgiving) Sept. 25 through Dec. 4. All-day field trips are scheduled for Oct. 18 and Nov. 16. Cost is \$435

For questions, go to www.rcrcd.org/california-naturalist-climate-steward-programs or contact staff at llc@rcrcd.org.



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On Oct. 9 several members of the Urban Conservation Corps of the Inland Empire graduated as California Naturalists. Graduates included, from left, Kimauni Cummings, Irma Barba, Gabby Nunez, Arliana Martinez and Michael Calderon



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On Dec. 14 another class graduated by teachers Erin Snyder, left and Michele Felix-Derbarmdiker, right. Students included, from right, Christina Olmeda-Lowry, Steven Orr, Irfan Razvi, Heather Mead, Alex Kagdis, Charlene Williams, Kim Landrum (back), Viviana Rodriguez, and Jennifer Manfre.



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On March 6, several members of the Urban Conservation Corps of the Inland Empire graduated as California Naturalists. Graduates included, from left, Isaiah Norris, Daelan Lewis, Isaac Marines, LaTravis Farmer, Jacob Holder, Darla Herrerra, Pedro Quintero, Julie Wagner and Charles Thomas.



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On March 26, several members of the Urban Conservation Corps of the Inland Empire graduated as California Naturalists. Graduates included, from left, Orlando Figueroa, Maya Stokes, Bethany Cruz, Rosario Moyeda, Gladys Herrera, April Garcia, Martin Ruiz and Terrell Powell.

‘Clean Nursery’ designation a win for restoration

RCRCD’s nursery has earned accreditation in a program to prevent the spread of fungus-like plant killers, joining only nine others in California.

UC Davis’ Accreditation to Improve Restoration (AIR) program is designed to keep Phytophthora plant pathogens out of nurseries and subsequently out of wildlands where they can cause significant damage.

Imagine putting new plants in the ground at a restoration site, and then watching everything (new and established) die.

“There have been more than 25 species of Phytophthora detected in California native revegetation sites and in nurseries that grow native stock for restoration projects,” said RCRCD Nursery Manager Ernesto Alvarado. “As an agency that is dedicated to conserving resources it is in our best interest to produce plant materials that are free of pathogens for restoration sites.”

To gain accreditation nurseries must comply with a list of practices such as growing plants off the ground on steel benches; and sanitizing all materials used to grow plants from soil and used pots to hand tools and benches.

Staff started implementing some of these practices five years ago, but found sanitizing the soil to be difficult. The nursery recently obtained a soil steamer that helped make the accreditation possible.

RCRCD’s nursery will only grow clean stock moving forward, and can contract grow for agencies that seek clean plants for restoration projects.

For more information about the program go to <https://airnursery.ucdavis.edu/>

For more information about RCRCD’s nursery, contact Nursery Manager Ernesto Alvarado at alvarado@rcrcd.org or (951) 683-7691, ext. 215.

Milkweed + Monarch event

Celebrate Western Monarch butterflies at our free event and buy native milkweed plants that feed their caterpillars from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. May 24 at the LandUse Learning Center, 4500 Glenwood Dr., Riverside.

The free Monarch Celebration includes information about the plight of these iconic butterflies, and how to help them; children’s crafts; and a butterfly photo booth.

Native narrowleaf milkweed plants will be sold for \$5 each while supplies last. Proceeds help fund RCRCD’s education programs.

Information: llc@rcrcd.org



Nursery Manager Ernesto Alvarado demonstrates how to run the soil steamer.



Phytophthora “translates to ‘plant destroyer’” reads a sign at RCRCD’s nursery.



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Partners in conservation



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American Planning Association members toured RCRCD's LandUse Learning Center as part of the group's state conference in September. Discussions revolved around how sustainability, smart land use and native plants lead to community resilience.



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Author Michael Wilken-Robertson, right, tours the LandUse Learning Center with Education & Engagement Specialist Erin Snyder in December. The following day Wilken-Robertson discussed his book "Kumeyaay Ethnobotany: Shared Heritage of the Californias" at an event at RCRCD.



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UC Riverside's Dr. Erin Rankin discusses hummingbirds at the Birds, Blooms, Bees and Butterflies event held at the LandUse Learning Center in collaboration with the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society. The event, which had about 400 attendees, was sponsored by the City of Riverside.



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Since October, Daniel Ajiduah, a student at California School for the Deaf, Riverside, has been helping out four days a week at the LandUse Learning Center. He has been beautifying the trail and signs, maintaining our compost demonstration and helping with facilities maintenance.



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Riverside City Councilman Phillip Falcone, right, and District Manager Kerwin Russell look for Santa Ana Suckers at RCRCD's fish runs as part of a November behind-the-scenes tour of RCRCD's main facility.



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Boy Scout Cole Peterson created several native animal silhouette signs for the Sycamore Creek Interpretive Center. The signs include conservation and other information about each species.

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Boy Scout Thomas Aguilar created a display to teach LandUse Learning Center visitors how long it takes different types of trash to decompose. The display is hanging next to trash and recycling cans to encourage visitors to properly dispose of their waste.



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In October a dozen members of the Urban Conservation Corps removed dry brush around the LandUse Learning Center buildings and covered the areas with mulch to prevent weed growth. The garden is now a better demonstration of fire safe techniques for landscapes.

College Corps fellows get diverse experiences

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UC Riverside College Corps fellows Gianni Espinoza, left, and Eddie Lara, tabled at Parkview Nursery's Hello Fall! Event in Riverside, discussing native plants with attendees. Nine students from local colleges are helping RCRCD for the school year.

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College Corps fellow Betty Brink, of Riverside City College, weeds pots in RCRCD's native plant nursery in January.



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College Corps fellow Diane Castillo, right, of Norco College, helps elementary students make nature journals as part of their school field trip to the LandUse Learning Center in December.



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College Corps fellow Jessica Leung, of UC Riverside, paints cattails in a mural on the floor of a building in the LandUse Learning Center.

New Employee Spotlight

Resource Conservation Technician Alicia Ruan wears many hats at RCRCD. As part of the Aquatics Resource Team she participates in projects such as fish surveys. She also helps maintain native fish runs, and collects/organizes data on native fish and water quality.

Beyond aquatics work, Alicia conducts soil testing, grows and plants native vegetation for restoration projects, and leads educational activities and tours for school field trips.

Contact her about soil testing at ruan@rcrcd.org or (951) 683-7691, ext. 214.



Resource Conservation Technician Alicia Ruan is part of the Aquatics Resource Team at RCRCD.

We ♥ volunteers!

Thank you to all the volunteers who have been helping us, including participants in the Love Riverside event who enhanced the compost and mulch display in the LandUse Learning Center's arbor walk in October.

Volunteering is fun and educational, so RCRCD offers a variety of opportunities for people to conserve natural resources. To get started check out all our volunteer opportunities, and complete the form at www.rcrcd.org/volunteeropportunities.



As part of the Love Riverside event volunteers spread compost and mulch in the LandUse Learning Center on Oct. 10.

Free Water Ed for Corona Students

The City of Corona's Utilities Department and RCRCD provide free programs and educational materials for classes and youth groups about water conservation and our local Santa Ana River watershed.

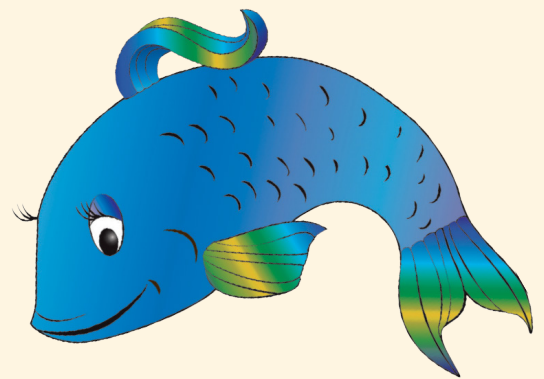
RCRCD's Education and Engagement Specialist Roxanne Robbins visits classrooms to conduct hands-on presentations that demonstrate water concepts. Free educational materials are also offered, and can be provided with or without a classroom presentation.

The water education program explains:

- simple ways to conserve water and why it is important
- where the City of Corona gets its water
- storm water pollutants and how we can reduce them

Students learn to reduce the amount of pollutants that enter our storm drain system that flows to waterways (washes, creeks, arroyos) and ultimately to the Santa Ana River and ocean. Since people unknowingly generate the largest amount of storm water pollution, we can be the largest part of the solution. Educating students about these concepts helps to ensure that future generations will understand the importance of water as an essential resource.

To request a classroom presentation and/ or educational materials, please contact her at robbins@rcrcd.org or (951) 683-7691, ext. 216.



Kerwin brings decades of experience to top post

Kerwin Russell, RCRCD's new District Manager, is not all that new. He has more than 30 years of experience as a natural resource manager, field supervisor and academic instructor. He was previously the Assistant District Manager, and before that, the Natural Resources Manager since he started with the District in 1988.

He has managed aquatic habitat and riparian restoration projects in the Santa Ana, San Jacinto and San Gabriel river watersheds on both private and public lands, providing native fish and amphibian restoration services and conducting habitat mitigation and conservation easement monitoring in much of Southern California. This involves the management and maintenance of more than 10,000 acres of open space with sensitive habitats, and oversight of numerous restoration, water conservation and fishery recovery projects.

Contact him at russell@rcrcd.org or (951) 683-7691, ext. 202.



Kerwin Russell looks for Santa Ana Sucker fish in the Santa Ana River in 2011.

Professional Development in Environmental Education

Opportunities abound for educators to expand their environmental lesson library. The Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District (RCRCD) offers a variety of teacher workshops and environmental curriculum.

These programs include:

- Project Learning Tree (PLT.org), a proven, award-winning, program that includes a K-8 Activity Guide as part of the training. Additional resources are available online.
- Project WET (www.watereducation.org/project-wet), which focuses on advancing water education to help students of all ages understand the value of water and global challenges to inspire local solutions for a more sustainable future. An accurate and science-based interactive curriculum guide is provided as part of the training.
- Population Connection (populationeducation.org)'s Population Education program, which provides K-12 teachers with innovative, hands-on lesson plans and professional development to teach about human population growth and its effects on the environment and our well-being. The website has resources for all age levels.

- Environmental Stewards (ucanr.edu/statewide-program/uc-environmental-stewards) is an adult education program from University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR) that includes two courses, California Naturalist and Climate Stewards. See page 4 for details.

All of these programs are standards-based and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)-aligned. For questions, contact staff at llc@rcrcd.org.



Education & Engagement Specialist Erin Snyder, left, teaches a Project Wet training.

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Support sought for statewide environmental competition

RCRCD hosted the 2025 statewide Envirothon competition on April 12 at the LandUse Learning Center. Eight teams from across the state participated, with Granada Hills Charter High School earning first place. That team will head off to the international competition in Alberta, Canada in July.

The competition, a program of the National Conservation Foundation, fosters hands-on learning in the areas of aquatic ecology, forestry, soils and land use, wildlife, and current environmental issues,

Each year over 25,000 high school students across the United States, Canada, China, and Singapore participate.

Unfortunately, support has dwindled, and California is in danger of losing the program. The NCF-CA Envirothon committee is reorganizing to strengthen the program and ensure its continued existence in the state.

A statewide sponsoring organization needs to be found to support these efforts. If you or your organization are interested in being involved in this important effort please contact the NCF-CA Envirothon committee at CaliforniaEnvirothon@gmail.com.

For more information about the program go to www.envirothon.org.



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Dozens of high school students from across California participated in the Envirothon competition at the LandUse Learning Center on April 12, 2025.



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High school students compete in the forestry portion of the 2025 California Envirothon competition at the LandUse Learning Center.

Tool Lending Library build is building community

Nonprofit DiHG Eco-Prise is offering Natural Building workshops and a Permaculture Design Course at RCRCD's LandUse Learning Center in Riverside. DiHG began constructing a community Tool Lending Library using sustainable materials and techniques at the Center in March.

The Tool Lending Library aims to empower individuals to utilize locally available resources, especially from the waste stream, to create functional and inspiring structures. Suggested donation is \$50 for each all-day workshop.

DiHG also teaches a permaculture program the second Saturdays of each month October through June.

Information: www.dihgeco.org or dihgeco@gmail.com.



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Teachers and students work on the frame of a Tool Lending Library as part of the Natural Building workshop in March 2025.

(continued from front cover)

What projects over the last 48 years do you think help our community the most?

It all goes back to conservation education, just educating children and adults about our natural resources (clean water, healthy soil to grow food, native plants and animals) and how they impact their everyday life. We're so bombarded with information, it can become learned helplessness, like, 'I can't change the world. I can't.' But I can do something in my own backyard.

If we start just at our own yard and our own community, then we can affect change. I have to think so.

What changes at the RCD over the past decades are you most proud of?

I would say the staff. I've been blessed to have a creative, and talented staff throughout the decades who have made the job so much easier. I've had a Board of Directors that understood that our role was to educate and provide the technical assistance.

I believed in what we were doing. As long as you believe in what you're doing and you feel like you can make a difference; that's why I stayed here for 48 years.

What are the biggest challenges ahead?

I love futuristic movies. Whether in movies or our books or plays or some other media type, the future looks bleak and dark and without color. No blue water or blue skies or green trees or plants, red rocks; everything just looks depressing. That's not what I want for our future.

I went to the World's Fair with my friend in 1974 and that was before I even came to work for the District.

At the Fair the quote 'The Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth' was attributed to Chief Seattle.

It really made an impact on me because it made me see how interconnected we are to the world that we live in.

My grandmother always used to say that when things get tough, take off your shoes and just become grounded with the soil. There's something about the earth that will center you. It's funny, as a kid I didn't think that would really make a difference in my life. But now, working in natural resource conservation, it is true that, understanding the importance and becoming grounded with our planet, our Earth, in our yards, it's very exhilarating and it's very satisfying.

One of the things I learned early on in working with professionals in soil and water conservation, is that we are stewards, and it's our job to use our resources



Staff planted a flower garden at the LandUse Learning Center to honor Shelli.

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wisely so that we can pass them on to the next generations.

How many women were in charge of conservation districts when you started?

I worked in a predominantly male field in the 1970s. Our initial Board that I worked with for so long, these were all men, but you know what, they were the most supportive men I've ever had the pleasure of working with. They believed in me. They gave me the freedom to be able to help the district grow.

But I also saw on the other side of it. Some women were told, 'go make a phone call for me' or 'go, make some coffee' or things like that. Some places didn't take women seriously.

I was blessed to have a Board of Directors that, as a woman, they supported me one thousand percent.

What's next?

One of the things that I want to do as I retire is to write some children's books. They're going to be "Mr. Puppies Wants to Play." Mr. Puppies is my dog, and the books are going to be based on the animals that have been in my life. Each little book may be an adventure about certain resources or certain values like being kind, whether it's kind to our resources or kind to others.

I think that's how we're going to change the world and make it a better place when we have people that care and are compassionate about what we do in our world.

Our actions should be guided by a deep respect for soil, water, plants, wildlife and air. A life without clean abundant water, thriving trees and plants, and healthy soils is not the life I want to pass on to future generations. Each of us has the power to make a difference at the local level and in our own backyards in the communities we participate in.

That, I feel, is my legacy.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



**Riverside-Corona
Resource Conservation District**

4500 Glenwood Drive
Building A
Riverside, CA 92501
(951) 683-7691
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www.facebook.com/RCRCD

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Naturalist-SCIC

UPCOMING EVENTS

LandUse Learning Center

Open 7 days a week, 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. Closed holidays.
4500 Glenwood Dr., Riverside



Milkweed sale and Monarch Celebration
May 24 (see page 5)

First Saturday Programs
Start at 10 a.m. Free.
June 7 Herbs: How to Select, Grow and Enjoy
Aug. 2 Healthy Soil

Ask a Master Gardener
9 a.m. - noon on the First Saturday of each month
September-June

California Naturalist Class
Thursday nights Sept. 25 - Dec. 4 (see page 4)
Field trips Oct. 18 and Nov. 16

California Native Plant Society
Lectures at 10 a.m. the third Saturday of each month
September-June
Information: cnps.org/chapters/riverside-sanbernardino

Permaculture Design Course
Second Saturdays 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. October-June (see page 10)
Information: dihgeco.org

Sycamore Creek Interpretative Center
11875 Indian Truck Trail, Temescal Valley



Story Time Among the Sycamores
Various Fridays and Saturdays
Information: scic@rcrcd.org

Saturday Speaker Series
June 7 Water, Irrigation and Riverside County

RCRCD serves parts of western Riverside & San Bernardino Counties; areas surrounding and portions of: Riverside, Corona, Norco, Grand Terrace, Colton, Reche Canyon, Temescal Canyon, Gavilan Hills, Highgrove, and Woodcrest. All RCRCD programs and services are offered on a nondiscriminatory basis, without regard to race, national origin, religion, age, gender, or orientation.

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