

VOLUNTEER OF THE MONTH

Jan Harris

Jane Reichhold: Please tell us how you came to live here on the coast?

Jan Harris: Wayne and I, with my 8-yr. old son Val, moved to Gualala from Marin County in the spring of 1979. We're California natives – Wayne from Napa and I from Berkeley. We wanted to escape the “fast lane” trend that was developing in Marin, so we came north, encouraged by and following my high school chum Sita (Dimitroff) Milchev, who had joined her parents in Gualala a couple of years before. Steve Dimitroff actually found our property for us. A week after we moved into the house we had just purchased, it burned down with most of our possessions. The community really stepped up and helped us out – Pay ‘n Take opened its doors to us for some clothing and a few household items and we ran a “tab” at Surf Super for a month.



Hospice, and this year, “Broadway Babes are Back” reuniting with Sita and Gloria for a concert.

JR: You are well-known around here for your work with the Redwood Coast Whale & Jazz Festival. How did you get that started?

JH: Several years ago, Karel Metcalf envisioned a Jazz Festival and I wanted a Whale Festival to emulate the Mendocino/Fort Bragg Chamber. So we collaborated and tried a mix of Whales and Jazz...and voilà! Its 6th year is coming up and the Festival now encompasses a number of community venues with different restaurants, as well as the events held at Gualala Arts Center.

JR: And the Festival of Trees?

JH: Four years ago, I was asked to volunteer for a Gualala Arts Christmas-themed Festival which has become Festival of Trees, the upcoming fundraising event over Thanksgiving weekend. It is still evolving. Last year we started the Shops & Galleries Holiday Showcase in the Burnett Gallery which was an “art exhibit” given over to merchandise available from local businesses during the holidays! It was a first and very successful, benefiting all concerned.

JR: All of this is in addition to your other jobs?

JH: Yes, we have two children, now grown and out of the “nest,” but who were raised here and went through our local schools. Val is married, living in Marin and proud father of our 3-yr. old grandson, Justin. Bryn is in New York, striving for a career in theater. My “day jobs” on the coast included working at Rams Head Rentals and several years as reservation manager at St. Orres, but for 13 years now, I have been self-employed, partnering with Wayne as Adventure Rents Canoes & Kayaks and running my wedding business Celebration Connection, in which I am a minister, wedding/event coordinator, and decorator. And for more than a decade, I was deeply involved with the Redwood Coast Chamber of Commerce and served on its Board and as President and Executive Director. I recently retired, so will have time for other endeavors...like working at Gualala Arts.

JR: How did you first experience Gualala Arts?

JH: In 1978, we attended Art in the Redwoods when Sita was in charge of the show held at the Gualala Community Center. Then some years later, I collaborated with Allen Francis, then Artistic Director of Gualala Arts, to produce the first Midsummer Faire for Art in the Redwoods at Bower Park. At the time Gualala Arts was at the airport. That first year of Shakespeare-in-the-Park we performed condensed versions of *Hamlet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. All the craftspeople were in costume with “period” crafts and demos. Even the food had to be “period” and included bangers ‘n mash! It was a huge success, and was the beginning of the style of the Art in the Redwoods festival that exists today.

JR: What other music and theater projects have you been involved with on the coast?

JH: Shortly after arriving here, I became director of the Arena Coast Music Association Choir replacing Anne Kessler, while Jeri Lu Breneman, became director of the women's A Capella choir. Wayne and I also joined the Ernest Bloch Bell Ringers – who had played for our garden wedding. That first season, I produced/directed an elaborate Christmas Concert at the Point Arena High School auditorium, with both choirs, the Bell Ringers performing numbers arranged by Wayne, excerpts from *Amahl & the Night Visitors* and Aaron Copeland's *The Tender Land*, and all of Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. That show had TWO intermissions!

Following that extravaganza, I directed three Musical Theater Workshops, Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* and the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, (which came to the Gualala Community Center when the high school auditorium was condemned) directed and played Mother in two productions of *Amahl & the Night Visitors* one at Gualala Community Center and one at Arena Theater. My own performing has been rather low key here on the coast, but I've played in local dramas *White Liars* and *Song at Twilight*, and sang in the original “Broadway Cabaret” with Sita and Gloria Wood, in Sita's “Black, White & Silver Revue” benefit for Shamli

JR: You have truly been an outstanding volunteer! What are your thoughts on that subject?

JH: Gualala Arts, in particular, is lucky to have such a vast pool of volunteers who bring their years of expertise and skills to the fore. It is my hope that younger people will see the value of volunteering for Gualala Arts. I do feel that our only real lack in the community is activities for our teens and a safe place for them to congregate. I intend to do something about that! As I move into my “golden years,” I find that staying active, involved, and learning new things is critical to keeping my mind sharp, and the social interaction cannot be beat! My response to those who say, “What does Gualala Arts (or any other organization) do for me?” is “Step up and give back of YOUR time and energies, and you won't be asking that question. You'll know!”