



Of Activism & The Ojai Spirit

Profiles in Volunteerism

By Daryl Kelley

From the start, Ojai lured those who felt the spirit of its towering mountains and fertile valleys and took time to bathe in the enduring glow of its Pink Moment – those who knew instinctively that here was somewhere special.

They wanted not only to maintain this village's rustic sophistication, but to make it a better place. Call them the Angels of Ojai.

Historically, these angels have included industrialist Edward Libbey, who rebuilt a dusty downtown into a model of Mission Revival architecture, and philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, whose philosophy of international peace and community drew devotees from around the world.

More recent angels are as varied as artsy

and agricultural Ojai itself: they're political activists and protectors of the environment, ambassadors of the arts and preservers of open spaces.

Literally hundreds strong, they assist the old and mentor the young, they shelter the poor and feed the hungry; they've rebuilt a hospital and buttressed local schools; they've erected a skate park, saved the Arcade, refurbished Libbey Bowl, and promoted music, and a healthy diet, for school children. As adversaries, they've battled freeways and garbage dumps, housing tracts, chain stores and gravel trucks.

They've tried to maintain this basin as a soothing blend of color and light, calmness and balance. And they have won. So far.

Ojai, a community of just 8,000 residents,





is home to more than 290 nonprofit organizations. It's also home for thousands of senior citizens, about a quarter of Ojai's population overall. That alone suggests residents itching for something worthwhile to do. Then there's the economics of the situation: Ojai is blessed with an unusual number of retired people with means: well-off expatriates from Los Angeles, and even New York City, who brushed Ojai's touch on vacation and decided this was where they wanted to be in the end.

"Ojai is a hotbed of community-directed energy," says farmer Jim Churchill, a founder of the Food for Thought program in local schools. "Try to schedule an event of any kind and find an available space on the calendar. It's hard. And that's the most astonishing thing for a community of this size."

Former Mayor Suza Francina ran for city council

in the 1990s on the back of a new Bicycle Coalition, then helped found the Ojai Wildlife League when Elliot the Bear was shot and killed by state workers after climbing an Aliso Street tree three years ago.

"There's all this invisible work going on," Francina says. "Ojai is probably at the top of any list of volunteerism. It's the glue that holds this community together."

Martha Ditchfield, president of the Ojai Valley Family Shelter program, which provides food and beds for homeless people at local churches in winter, said: "I have issues with people who aren't in control of themselves, but I just felt compelled to do this." She is also the president of the local public school teachers union and oversees a school district program for 300 foster and homeless kids.

"There are so few degrees

of separation here in Ojai," she says. "You really feel connected."

It is that feeling of connection, and the need to give back, that the OQ's profile subjects have in common. They are just a few of the Ojai Valley's wealth of volunteers: hospital fundraisers John and Peggy Russell, anti-development catalysts John and Kathy Broesamle, Music Festival benefactor Esther Wachtell, public water advocate Pat McPherson, and playwrights' conference co-founder Kim Maxwell.

"Kathy has said living in Ojai is a privilege that entails certain obligations," says retired history professor John Broesamle. "It's kind of like paying your dues to keep it the way it is."

The following pages contain the stories of seven locals who volunteer their time for the good of their community.



Kim Maxwell

Growing in the Ojai Garden

It's been 20 years since Los Angeles actress Kim Maxwell pulled into the Painted Pony Farm in the Upper Ojai for a goat milk ice cream. A house right behind was for sale. A fixer upper, and the mortgage was half what she was paying for rent. So she decided to give it a try.

"And I just fell in love. Brandi Crockett came across the creek with Rice Krispie treats. And she has never stopped coming. Nor has this town stopped giving. Ojai is like a big garden where you grow things."

Since then, Maxwell has grown her own crop of Ojai institutions: She co-founded Theater 150 in 1997 and the nationally recognized Ojai Playwrights Conference in 1998. She was the producing director at the Playwrights Conference for several years. But she also volunteered extensively for the theater and the conference before finally segueing the skills she learned into a career as an acting teacher and consultant. She remains the youth director at the summer Playwrights event.

Maxwell and friends created the playwrights conference literally from discussions in their living rooms. Potential supporters attended. Food was donated. Then Dennis Rice, headmaster at Happy Valley School (now Besant Hill School) at the time, "just gave us his theater as a venue. And because of that, we now have a Who's Who of American theater coming to visit us twice a year," for a winter fund-raiser and the summer conference itself.

Meanwhile, struggling Theater 150 finally closed a year ago, but not before hundreds of plays and concerts were performed and untold children were trained by Maxwell and others in their first thespian experiences.

"I found this town encouraged me to have a bigger life, and a lot of that started with volunteerism," Maxwell says today, as workmen fashion a new yard outside another fixer-upper she bought last year in Ojai. "I feel like I've been raised by the

nonprofit organizations and their leaders in this town. When you volunteer you get to work with people who are better than you. So volunteerism is like free college, because you get to expand your skill set with someone expert in the field. And there are so many fiercely talented, generous people in this town – generous of spirit, time and dollars."

Joan Kemper may top that list, Maxwell said. "She is the pope of nonprofits. That woman has invested a lifetime in the arts. Everywhere she walks she makes concerts happen."

A native of Seattle and raised in Canada, Maxwell arrived in Los Angeles as a 19-year-old, studied fine arts in Santa Monica, then landed a recurring TV role on prime-time soap-opera "Knots Landing" in 1984. "It was a really terrible show, and I was terrible in it. One season as a big-haired bimbo."

The role began a period of consistent work in plays, commercials, television shows and films.

But by the time she arrived at the Painted Pony for a hike and an ice cream in 1992, Maxwell was burned by the fierce, money-oriented nature of her industry. The small-town girl hadn't taken to the big city.

"I arrived here really broken and battered from the film and television industry," Maxwell says. "And it was volunteering – working alongside the people of this community – that saved my life. And helped me decide who I am and where I was to go. I was rescued by volunteerism."

Today after three years as a fund-raiser and publicist at Besant Hill School, which her daughter Lily attended, Maxwell is preparing to launch acting classes for teenagers, women and mixed groups under the aegis of KMStudio. But first she plans to graduate from Women's Economic Ventures in Ventura, where she's added rigorous structure to her creative skill set. "I worked in chaos and can again, but I have found that infrastructure sets you free. As Kim Exon (a friend and another prominent Ojai volunteer) says: 'It's better to do less, well.' And that concept has literally changed my life. I have big plans, but I'm starting small."



Photo by Logan Hall