

IT'S OUR COUNTRY!

ADMIRING THE U.S. — AND MAKING IT BETTER

BY SUZI STEFFEN WITH HELP FROM CHUCK ADAMS

The fireworks have burst, the potato salad is safely packed in the fridge and we've returned to work from a day when we're reminded that the country's ideals couldn't be higher — as Abraham Lincoln said in the Gettysburg Address, the plan is a government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Of course, we fall short of these ideals, both in history — the seizure of Native peoples' lands; slavery for Africans and African Americans; the Chinese Exclusion Act; internment camps for Japanese Americans — and now: institutionalized torture and “extraordinary rendition”; hostility toward Latino immigrants; the dismantling of abortion rights; the Supreme Court's shocking decision about school desegregation. This country could be so much better.

And it has been. For some of us, the Bill of Rights is one of the most precious documents ever produced. Others are proud of the Emancipation Proclamation, the widespread resistance of slaves, the courageous stands taken by many Native peoples and the resurgence of tribes from the Navajo/Dine to the Klamath. We take courage from the examples of Dolores Huerta, Paul Wellstone, Dorothy Day, June Jordan, John Muir, Emma Goldman and Harold Ickes. Some of us are fired up by the churches and individuals who took part in the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s and who are leading the charge in the New Sanctuary movement. We admire these people and movements and documents; we also love our fern gullies, our sloughs and our mountains.

And we're tired of letting the right wing define “patriotism” or decide what it means to be an American. We're sick of watching as others subvert our rights, waving the flag all the way to warrantless wiretapping. We're fed up with watching the free fall of our ideals and the free fall of our approval ratings across the entire planet.

We live here, we work here, we grow food and make love and raise children and create art and community here, in this country. And we want to share our passion and our gratitude with all of those working to stave off despair — working to better this place we call home.

We asked a series of four questions to various people around town working or volunteering towards a better society. Here are some of their voices, the voices of people working toward the goals set out so beautifully in the documents that founded this nation.

Kate Ritley is the Development Director of the Cascadia Wildlands Project, and she wrote an all-in-one response to our questions.

Late in the 1970's, my folks built a log home amid the mossy, misty forests of Washington's Olympic Peninsula. They were still using a chainsaw inside the house when I arrived home from the hospital. My childhood was a medley of long summer days building forts in the woods, family camping trips to rivers like the Hamma Hamma and Dosewallips and precarious drives up snowy logging roads to find the perfect Christmas tree.

The forests, mountains and streams I grew up exploring formed the foundation of my love for this country. These places shaped my understanding of *homeland* well before I could recite the Pledge of Allegiance or differentiate a Republican from a Democrat.

As many well know, the '80s and '90s on the peninsula and beyond were defined by timber boom and bust. Though oblivious to the political muckraking, newspaper headlines and restaurant signs for “spotted owl soup,” I took deep, personal offense to the stumpfields that were rapidly replacing my beloved forests. Around the time of the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994, at the tender age of 12, I resolved to dedicate my life to fighting for the places, the *homeland*, that I love.

Ten years older and wielding a degree in environmental studies, I followed the timber wars south to Oregon. In my first job as a grassroots organizer, I worked with UO students to restore national Roadless Area protection. Soon my attention switched to a local focus as I worked with the Cascadia Wildlands Project and Oregon Wild to pro-



tect forests in the McKenzie River watershed. Somewhere between gathering petition signatures at the Eugene Celebration and writing my first grant proposals, the Cascadia Wildlands Project asked me to take the title of Development Director.

Development work wasn't exactly what I envisioned as an impassioned 12-year-old, but it has given me a meaningful, professional and powerful way to contribute to our region's conservation movement. As long as we live in a country where money flows freely from corporate accounts to political pockets and our government auctions off old-growth trees to the highest bidder, it is my job to raise money on behalf of the wild places I love. My work enables my fellow staff members to educate, organize, agitate, collaborate, litigate and advocate for public lands owned

by every American. What could be more patriotic than protecting our natural heritage for future generations of Americans to enjoy?

While some people might feel defeated by our current administration or jaded by decades of uphill battles, I see that the tide is turning in our favor. Public support for protecting old-growth forests has never been higher. Congress is moving toward legislating protection for older forests throughout the Pacific Northwest. New models of restoration forestry are enhancing wildlife habitat and reviving rural economies. Fueled by my deep-rooted love for these landscapes and youthful idealism, I intend to make sure this tide never turns around.

I hope by the time I retire from the conservation profession, clearcuts will have gone the way of the dinosaurs and wolf howls will echo through the mountains. In the meantime, I will continue my fight to protect, defend and honor my *homeland*.



Betty Taylor is the Ward 2 representative on Eugene's City Council.

Tell me one or two things (people, historical movements or documents, etc.) that you admire in or about the United States.

The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

What makes you hopeful about the country right now?

I'm not very hopeful right now. I hope that Hillary Clinton will be the next president. The fact that the Democrats made big gains in the last election makes me somewhat hopeful, but they're not doing as much as I hoped or as fast as I hoped.

We need to get back a middle class, which is what FDR did, really, during his time. We came to have a strong middle class, and now we have the wealthy and the poor; the middle class is shrinking. I don't know that I'm hopeful about that, but I think it's something we really need to restore. And the tax structure could do part of that — and also protecting jobs.

How are you participating in making the U.S. a better place to live?

I'm trying to make Eugene a better place — or keep it as good as it is. I was really inspired a long time ago by a woman who was the national president of the League of Women Voters who gave a talk about doing things in your little corner of the world that contribute to everything. Saving natural areas is what I'm trying to do. And supporting our sister city relationships, which is our contribution to international relations. I try to get people answers when they have problems and stand up for people when they're being mistreated.

If you had an unlimited supply of money and/or time to tackle one problem, what would it be and what would you do?

One problem? I would buy all the natural areas that are left in Eugene and give them to the city, if I made sure beforehand that I could guarantee that they will remain that way, not that they would build something on it. And I would put in a rail line, at least for the central part of town.



David Fidanque is the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon and the chairperson of the national ACLU Executive Directors Steering Committee. Fidanque says he “grew up in Manhattan about 2 miles from Ground Zero.”

Tell me one or two things (people, historical movements or documents, etc.) that you admire in or about the United States.

The history of this country is a continuing saga of a people striving to realize a vision of freedom. We have made much progress since 1776, but a lot remains to be done. After the bloody Civil War we abolished slavery, but racism remains deeply rooted in our society. Women won the right to vote in 1920, but a majority of our Supreme Court still seems to think that men