

Siuslaw News
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
For the Siuslaw News

Sue & Steve Saubert



It all began on a ski slope and ended up in a grotto full of Steller sea lions. When Sue and Steve fell in love 50 years ago on their first ski date at Mt. Ashland, they never imagined a future managing America's largest sea cave as a wildlife sanctuary. The two students at Southern Oregon University not only had their sights set on each other, but also on careers in business administration in places far from Florence.

Steve grew up "behind the counter" of the family business at the Sea Lion Caves, with a daily Discovery Channel showcase before his very eyes. Back then the viewing station consisted of "a fence and a two-by-four" unlike the present 300-foot enclosure. Steve will never forget when, at age 6, a sea lion sneezed right in his face, covering him with goop.

"I've seen everything imaginable there," he said. "That includes the wind gauge locked at 130 miles per hour, with the glass plate windows moving. It was unbelievable."

Steve's grandparents had partnered with the Jacobson and Houghton families when the Sea Lion Caves opened in 1932, long before the highway and bridges appeared. Tourists paid 25 cents to lumber down a spiral staircase of 135 steps as his grandmother led the way with a kerosene lantern. Steve's dad and grandfather ran the operation with the other families for more than half a century, eventually

installing an elevator in 1961. "Everybody thought they were crazy," Steve said. "But it was a brave and visionary venture. Our goal was and still is to never inhibit the wildlife or let them know we're there. This is not a zoo but a protected marine wildlife reserve."

When Steve left for college and met Sue, his career goals didn't include the cave. Yet the couple would follow a long and winding road that would eventually lead them back to Florence.

After graduation, Steve worked for a company establishing college and hospital food service operations and was transferred out of state right after the couple's honeymoon — skiing, of course. His fast-paced career demanded constant relocation, which kept the Sauberts packing and unpacking in a series of whirlwind moves through several Western states while raising two young daughters. Finally, they decided to drop a permanent anchor in Florence.

"We were never anywhere long enough to form close ties," Sue said. "All those moves explain why we've been in Florence for 36 years. We hardly ever use our RV because it's so perfect here."

"I learned that to serve people with an open heart, without judgment and in a loving way, was the most important daily goal in my life."

—SUE SAUBERT

The prodigal son returned to the Sea Lion Caves in 1970 as general manager, continuing the three-family partnership until 2006, when the Houghtons sold their share. The Sauberts and Jacobsons maintain the operation to this day.

"The caves became my pride and passion," Steve said. "The sea lions would not be there had we not preserved their habitat. In a funny way, we've 'caged' the visitors in an enclosed viewing station while the animals come and go as they please. We've also brought in marine biologists to study them."

The Sea Lion Caves will mark its 85th anniversary next year, and the partners plan to install an entirely new "green" electronic elevator system at a cost of \$500,000.

"Our goal is to constantly upgrade while preserving the natural resource," Steve said. "This isn't a rubber-tire tourist trap or a Disneyland. It's a home and refuge for wildlife."

Over the years, the Sauberts have made an extraordinary impact on the Florence community and economy, with endeavors too long to list. From supporting scholarships at Lane Community College to promoting state tourism and local cultural events like the Winter Music Festival, they have given much time, energy and resources to various causes and organizations.

Sue served on the board of P.E.O. International, a philanthropic women's educational organization, and as a full-time administrator at The Shorewood, a senior living facility the couple had owned, in addition to operating Florence Travel for many years.

Steve devoted his time to the Oregon Tourism Council and the Pacific Northwest Travel Association boards and served as president of the Oregon Coast Association and the Florence Chamber of Commerce. Despite a severe gas shortage one year, he still found resourceful ways to attract tourists to the Oregon coast.

The couple also supported the development of PeaceHealth Peace Harbor Medical Center. In 1987, Steve worked with a group of community leaders in the "Partners in Progress" campaign, raising \$1.2

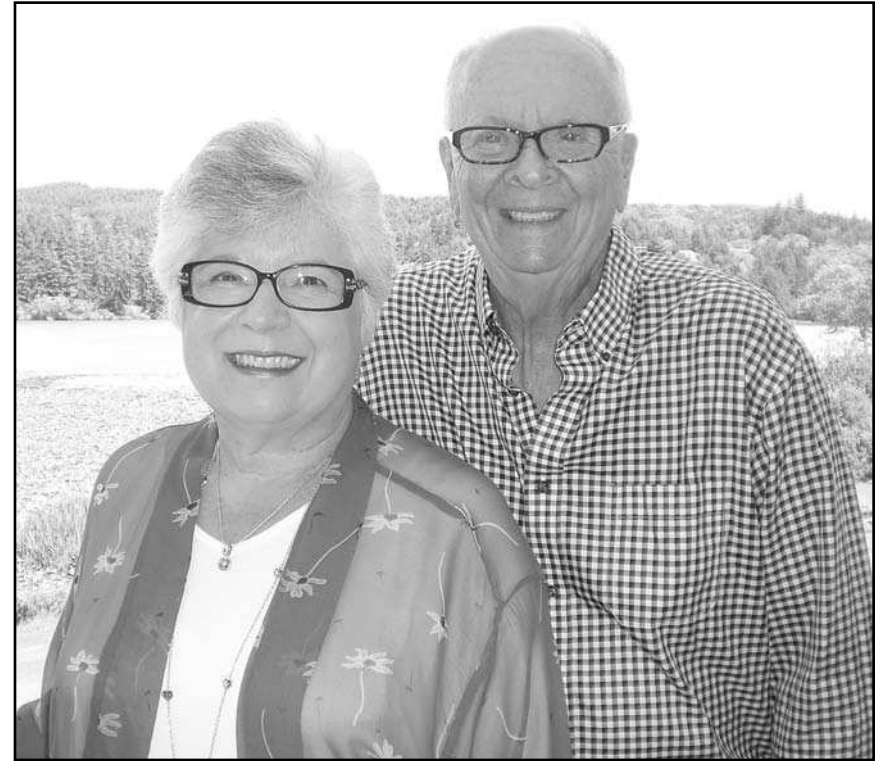


PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Sue and Steve Saubert have enhanced the lives of sea lions as well as those of many people in the community by supporting good causes.

million in just four months for the building. Sue became a member of the governing board and its first female chairperson.

"I enjoyed every minute of the responsibilities and new relationships that were formed in that position," she said. "Working with the board members, hospital administrators and doctors was an experience that I will never forget."

As Sue and Steve approach their 49th wedding anniversary, they share some advice for a long and happy marriage, chalking it up to compromise and communication.

"We have weathered many ups and downs," Sue noted. "But we both have learned patience and understanding with each other."

Together, their legacy of half a century remains pretty impressive for a couple of former college ski bums.

"Early on in my life I learned that to serve people with an open heart, without judgment and in a loving way, was the most important daily goal in my life," Sue said. "I feel that it is important to recognize and appreciate everyone in general, not just our family or friends."

For Steve and Sue, that appreciation includes wildlife too.

"I will always have a special place in my heart for the whales and sea lions," Steve said. "Working at the Sea Lion Caves has made me understand and appreciate them all."

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJReditor@gmail.com.

Understanding the true meaning of courage

I was going to present this viewpoint with lots of facts and illustrations about homelessness. But since I have become older, I realize that there is nothing more compelling than the real-life stories of people.

So I am going to start at the beginning. Four years ago I walked into the small front room of the Helping Hands Coalition for the homeless in search of a sleeping bag for my granddaughter's boyfriend.

Two weeks later I was in the back kitchen cooking stroganoff for 25 people. I was scared but optimistic. The sauce was runny and there were too many noodles, but I had never seen people who stared at their plates with such joy and delight on their faces.

When a professional cook volunteered, I began to serve in the dining room. On my first day, five young men showed up who had all grown

up with my son. I hadn't seen them in at least 10 years. They recognized me right away. I told them that Luke was serving in Afghanistan.

I noticed that when the kitchen crew would joke around, the people in the dining room became very relaxed and started conversations with their tablemates.

I remember summers when little children would run down the hall because they heard that we were giving out cookies in the back room. Their clothes never did match up, but they didn't seem to worry about it.

One of our dishwashers had to leave to care for her husband who had cancer, so I stepped in to help out. I could

see into the clothing room from my sink, and I remember a young woman sinking to her knees in the corner by the coats, sobbing and sobbing. They wrapped her in a blanket and sat there with her for a long time.

One day I went out to drive home, and my tire was flat. A young couple in a camper truck found my spare but it was bald so they gave me theirs instead.

It puts a smile on my face to remember a Fourth of July barbecue when one of our veterans showed up in a Civil War uniform. Another vet got down under the sink when the pipes broke and rigged everything together until someone could get to the store.

Another year went by, and we noticed that our visitors were getting to know one another and they would stop to visit in the parking lot. People would run in at lunchtime and announce that they had found a job. Then it was time to look for work clothes in the clothing room. One morning when I was making chilidogs, a group of guys knocked on the back door. The carnival had just hired them, so they found fresh shirts, boots and pants to wear.

I have so many stories, so many memories.

We are leaving our little building and moving to a larger space. I know that it will be different, but I will be so glad to see all of those delighted faces again. They make me cry and they make me laugh and I did not understand the true meaning of courage until I had to find a sleeping bag for my granddaughter's boyfriend.

LETTERS

Being responsible

I fully support Madelyne Barnett's recent letter ("Assault Weapons," July 13) stating that we do not need a purveyor of assault weapons in our peaceful, beautiful town.

I was curious to know if this was a corporate mandate or if the owners of the Florence True Value had made this profit-based decision on their own. I called Farr's True Value stores in Coos Bay and Coquille and was told that they do not sell assault weapons.

Responsible hunters do not use such weapons. The sole purpose of these guns is to kill as many living beings in the shortest possible time.

I have been a loyal True Value shopper wherever I have lived in the past. No more.

Until the day that I read that True Value has stopped the sale of these weapons that have caused such carnage and grief around our country, I will find what I need elsewhere.

Lisa Readell
Florence

Happy faces

Thank you for printing a pleasant face on your TV Guide (July 20). I've been depressed every time your guide has such terrible, horrid faces on the TV Guide cover.

Please, keep printing happy faces on the cover.

B.W. Fowle
Florence

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed.

All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published.

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