

A Life Well Lived
Feb. 2, 2016
Sylvia McLaughlin Memorial Service
Remarks by Robert Cheasty,
President, Citizens for East Shore Parks

Acknowledgements to family and friends.

Remarks:

Friends,

I join you here to celebrate the life of Sylvia McLaughlin, a life well lived.

Sylvia filled a lifetime of roles: homemaker, wife, mother, grandmother and those alone would have been a full life – raising her wonderful family and passing along those superb values and traits we all admired in her.

But Sylvia saw other needs as well and she envisioned a better way for us to live.

Robert Kennedy once said “Some see things as they are and say, why; I dream things that never were and say, why not.”

Sylvia dreamed of a better world. But she was not just a dreamer, she was a practical dreamer, a dreamer who figured out how to impact decisions and how to assemble to people, resources, power and the law to make the changes she wanted.

Like most dreamers she did this by taking the first step – she dreamed. And she dreamed big.

As almost all of you know, in the 1960s Sylvia shook the Bay Area with the idea that we could save the bay, that we could stop the

planned filling of the Bay by the companies and cities who controlled the shoreline.

She was almost desperate to stop the plans to fill the bay. After trying to get the major conservation leaders to do this for her and striking out, she got together with two friends, Kay Kerr and Esther Gulick. They built saving the bay into probably the first recognizable grass roots environmental movement. She tapped a nerve; ignited the imaginations of the Bay Area, and sparked a prairie fire that spread across the country to communities everywhere. Following on the heels of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* this was the call to action that people could understand, people could respond to. You might say our modern environmental movement was set off by three desperate housewives.

Sylvia understood that we need to act for the common good. She understood that most of what we do is made up. We can have the world we want, we just have to take action and not cede control to those whose self-interest is taking a wrecking ball to our planet. That is what Sylvia understood – that was her simple genius.

Just as John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, helped pioneer the notion of conservation, doing nothing less than create the idea of public land as our national treasure, owned by every citizen, Sylvia helped transition the conservation movement into the modern environmental movement, creating the notion that this planet is given to all of us as stewards, charged with the duty to protect its waters, its air, its habitat for all creatures big and small who share the planet.

And like Willie Mays, she made it look easy. In the 1970s she continued this work with Save the Bay and in the 1980s she began the focus of creating a shoreline park out of the dumps and active fill sites along the East Shore of the San Francisco Bay. Over the three decades during which I worked with Sylvia on this East Shore State Park project, I watched as over and over she made the difficult look easy, the impossible look inevitable.

Sylvia showed by example that we could forge our dreams into practical visions and plans for our friends to see and share in. And of course with her it worked because we were always among friends - because Sylvia did not know any enemies, only friends and those whom she would soon make her friends.

She welcomed all comers. Sylvia could disarm a hostile legislative hearing with her common sense words - and get them to see that what she was proposing was simply a good idea that we all want to see happen. And of course it was not just her ideas but the kindness of her delivery, the common decency she employed when sharing her thoughtful words.

She was a teacher most of all. She taught how to live, how to speak, how to appeal to the better angels of our nature. When you fell short she lifted you up with her words, reminding you that this was never over, and that you live to fight another day. She knew you had it in you. This is not to say she did not expect to see best efforts. She knew how to politely remind you to not be late again.

When she lost the occasional point with her colleagues in arms she was never bitter. She focused on to the next item, never letting the atmosphere be acrimonious.

She considered this a marathon, that saving the bay, saving the redwoods, preserving the shoreline, protecting the environment is never completed, but just a work in progress. If she lost the occasional point she was never bitter. She focused on to the next item, never letting in any acrimony.

To fully appreciate what she did it helps to put her life in context, Sylvia was born before women had the constitutional right to vote. She grew up in a world where women learned to wield power through bank shots or domestic leverage; and learned to do every move that Fred Astaire could do, only backwards and in high heels, just like Ginger Rogers. When she went to Vassar she was among the

miniscule percentage of women who were college graduates at that time.

The epitome of “Old School,” Sylvia never forgot to dress up for hearings, never neglected to send out thank you cards, always had tea, coffee and pastries when she hosted meetings.

And she had courage, perseverance and she was fun to work with. I have many delightful memories of our days, including when she was part of the flying squad we created to push the park into existence in the early 2000s. We would pop up to Sacramento or to meet with power brokers in the Bay Area - Arthur Feinstein for Audubon, Norman LaForce for the Sierra Club, Sylvia for Save the Bay and me for CESP. At every meeting Sylvia would add just the right touch, say just the best thing at the most opportune moment.

And travelling with Sylvia was a real sideshow. One time I took her down to see the new digs for Save the Bay in Oakland. This is a grand headquarters with beautiful light and air and lots of offices, and workstations, with a bevy of people working. When we were ushered in to see David Lewis we had to go down this hallway and as we went word that Sylvia McLaughlin was in the building spread. Heads started popping out of doorways and people starting coming up and introducing themselves to Sylvia. Here she was, a living legend, the woman herself, the inspiration that launched all this mischief. People were almost giddy to shake her hand.

I really enjoyed taking her to the Meadow at the Berkeley shoreline after they installed the new Eastshore State Park signage containing her picture. After a bunch of coaxing I got her to strike the same pose as in the picture, so I could take photo of her posing all visionary in front of the exact same image in the sign. Andy Warhol would have loved working with Sylvia.

She was up for doing fun, goofy things - like the time Jim McGrath talked us into kayaking out in the Bay. It was a cold overcast day and I believe Sylvia was about 90 then but we went out on to the Bay and

had a grand time. You can see the photo of the kayaking group – it was the centerfold of the booklet we had at the 30th Anniversary of CESP.

But perhaps the most hilarious thing Sylvia did in recent years was while trying to protect that beautiful grove of old oaks at the Cal campus. She was maybe 94 years old and here she was climbing a tree with her friends Betty Olds and Shirley Dean. For those of you who don't know Betty and Shirley, Betty was a Berkeley Councilmember in her 80s and Shirley was the former Mayor of Berkeley and in her 70s. What most people did not know was that Shirley is terrified of heights. So here they were climbing a tree, with Sylvia being the only one in the world who could get Shirley Dean up in a tree. The story went viral and got world-wide coverage.

And typically when we named the park after Sylvia it was a struggle, not only did we have to wrestle with the legislature and the State Park Dept., but we had to coax Sylvia into it. True to her nature she wanted the park to be named after Dwight Steele, her comrade in arms who himself was a giant in protecting the environment and saving the shoreline. It took months of wrangling with her and explaining:

- that the park had to be named after a volunteer, in honor of the thousands of volunteers who worked with us to will this park into existence;
- that we had to name the park after her so we could inspire more volunteers to join in protecting the bay;
- that there were no state parks named after a woman
- and that she would just have to take one for the team.

She finally agreed.

Sylvia showed us how to make a difference, how to convert new friends, how to serve the common good. And she showed us how to have a life well lived.

At this point I normally would present a plaque to the family, to honor Sylvia's precious memory. Instead, we had a State Park named after her.

Robert Cheasty
President, Citizens for East Shore Parks