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HALF MOON BAY REVIEW
MAGAZINE
NOVEMBER 2009

INTERVIEW WITH
LEN ERICKSON

THE PUMPKIN RUN
PHOTO ESSAY

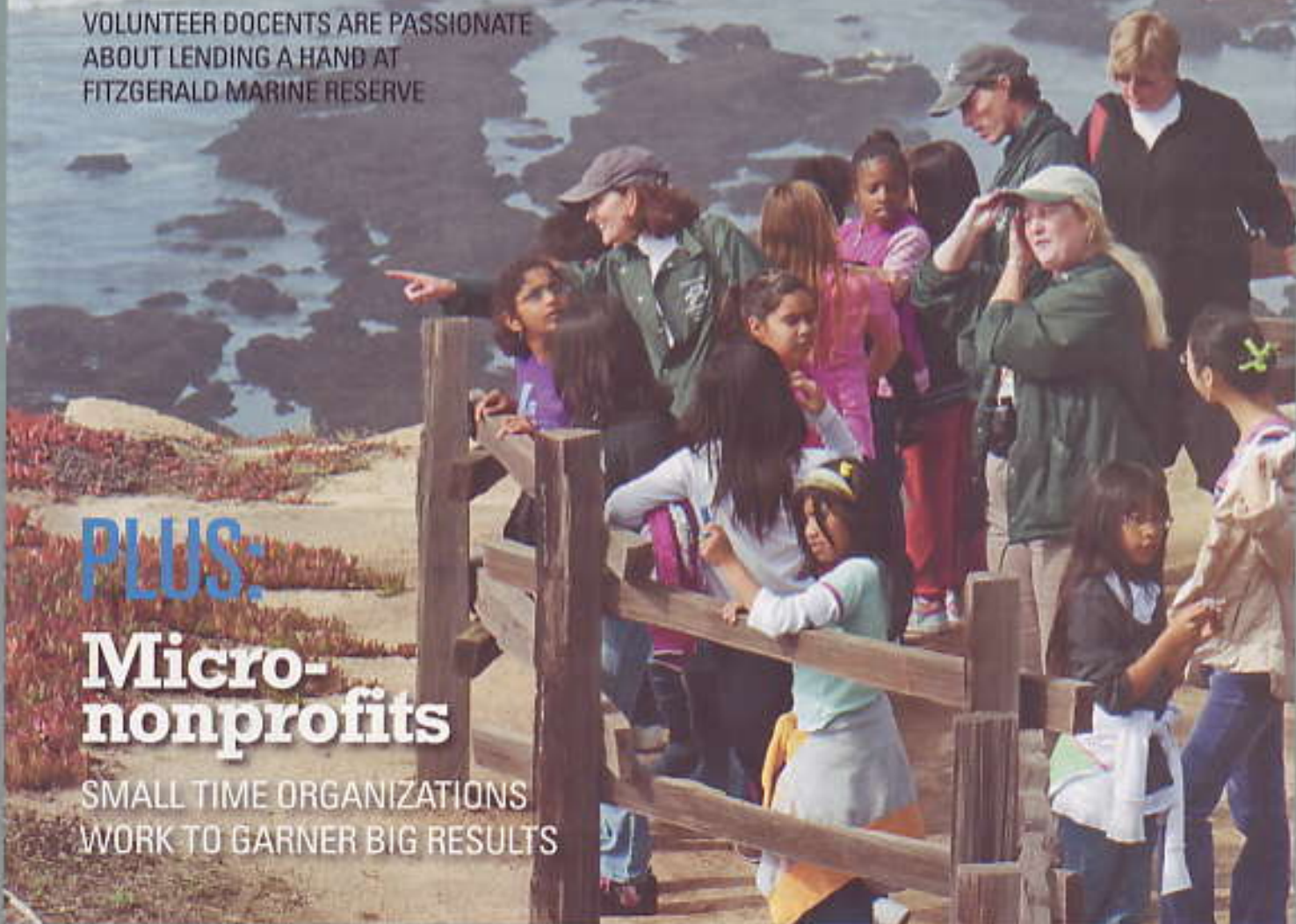
volunteer

COASTSIDERS GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

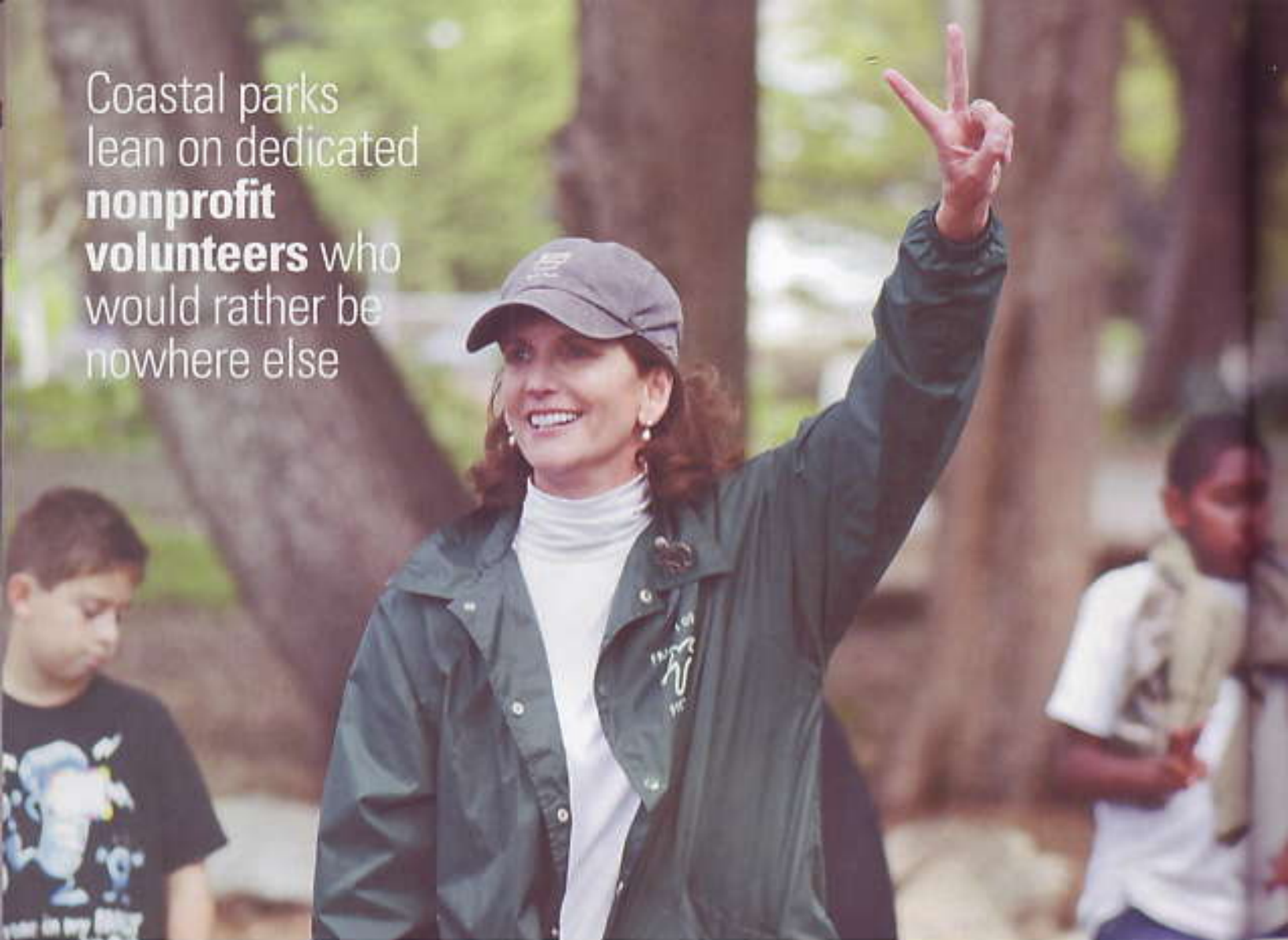
VOLUNTEER DOCENTS ARE PASSIONATE
ABOUT LENDING A HAND AT
FITZGERALD MARINE RESERVE

PLUS:
Micro-
nonprofits

SMALL TIME ORGANIZATIONS
WORK TO GARNER BIG RESULTS



Coastal parks
lean on dedicated
**nonprofit
volunteers** who
would rather be
nowhere else



'I choose this'

BY MARK NOACK

Friends of Fitzgerald Marine Reserve volunteer Tina Conway teaches a visiting school group about the proper way of touching marine life, with two fingers.

Standing in the center of a circle of about 60 fourth-graders weary from a long bus ride, tour leader Tina Conway had one goal — to get the kids excited about the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

"I've been all over the world," she said to the class. "And I love this place more than any other."

A former tech industry employee from Woodside, Conway, 54, still had the look of Silicon Valley professionalism despite her worn green baseball cap and windbreaker and her blue jeans stitched with crab and starfish patterns.

The tour she was leading this day was for the children from Alvarado Elementary — one of the dozens of scheduled tours given by the marine reserve's dedicated volunteers each month.

Working for more than eight years as a volunteer, Conway is one among 70 workers participating in the Friends of Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, the nonprofit group that provides the bulk of the fundraising and labor for the Moss Beach nature preserve. The four-mile beach reserve celebrates its 40th anniversary on Nov. 1. Those in the know credit that lifespan to its cadre of supporters and their ongoing effort to show the public at large the natural

habitat at Fitzgerald.

Showing Fitzgerald to the students from Alvarado Elementary was a perfect example of the importance of the mission, Conway said, as she led the students along a hiking path to view the shoreline. How could the inner-city students learn to protect something they knew nothing about? Conway asked.

Alvarado Elementary serves mostly low-income minority children from Union City. Although the tour of the marine reserve was free, the school was only able to afford busing the children across the Bay Area because of a large grant to cover field trips.

Conway led the pack of children along the steep hike up the ocean bluffs. Up top, the panoramic shoreline, dotted with birds and sunbathing sea lions, delivered the importance of preserving the coast better than any book or class exercise. For some, the sight was beyond beautiful; it was a revelation.

"Most of these kids have never been to the beach," said fourth-grade teacher Steve Partridge. "Last year when we were here, the toughest kid in the class ... he hugs my leg at the end of the day and says, 'This is the best thing I've ever seen.' 'My eyes teared up when he said that,' Partridge said.



Volunteer docents point out sea lions on the shore. It's a big surprise for visiting school groups.



It takes a lot of patience and encouragement to convince some children to touch bull kelp, but most warm up to the idea after Conway demonstrates with a big smile.

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— STEVE PARTRIDGE,
ALVARADO ELEMENTARY TEACHER



Despite warnings of staying back from the water's edge, students from Alvarado Elementary find themselves immersed in a small surge of water and are helped to dry land by the volunteers.

As Partridge spoke, his class was exploring the tide pools along the shore, literally getting their feet wet in the chilly marine ecosystem. The young students spread out, playing along the ocean pools, shrieking in glee as they touched the slimy sea anemones and the tentacle-like bull kelp. It might as well have been the surface of Mars.

"Hey! Where's SpongeBob at?" asked one boy, inspecting a large starfish.

"This day's better than recess," said 10-year-old Prabhjot, a cheery field-trip student who proudly said he's been at the beach before, in Florida. "But I've never seen things like this before — the beach and the animals and everything here."

Educating the public was a prime reason local environmentalists collaborated to start the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, believed by some to be the most diverse coastal habitat in California. But in the 1960s, visitors were known to treat the marine habitat like a big souvenir shop, and many a beachgoer would glean a few seashells, rocks or animal pets.

Although California already had many state and national

parks by the '60s, the public at large remained wobbly on the logic behind a nature preserve. For instance, around the time Fitzgerald opened, Yosemite National Park still held on to its tradition of pushing burning logs off the cliff face of Glacier Point to delight tourists.

"A marine reserve was such a new idea at the time," said Bob Breen, a retired park naturalist who has trained volunteers at Fitzgerald since 1972. "People were mystified and they'd ask, 'Why are you protecting snails and sea anemones? They're all over the place!'"

Getting the public to be more conscientious of their natural

park was a gradual process, Breen said, and the growing teams of volunteers became the frontline troops.

But today, the need to protect the reserve has become ingrained in the community. In 2005, when the Fitzgerald bluffs were used to film scenes for the big-budget movie "Memoirs of a Geisha," locals soon became disenchanted with the production and questioned how the project would damage their beloved reserve.

"THIS DAY'S BETTER THAN RECESS!"

PRABHJOT, A 10-YEAR-OLD STUDENT



After building up their courage, Alvarado Elementary students pick up and study the underside of a sea star during a low tide visit to the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

Every natural preserve on the coast subsists on the consistent aid given by volunteers.

"It would be impossible to keep our activities going without our volunteers," said Joyce Pennell, board member for the San Mateo Coast Natural History Association, a 300-volunteer group that helps care for the diverse state parks spread throughout the Coastsides. "For most of us, the coast is just really special."

Volunteers handle critical roles along the many public nature reserves along the coast, especially at Año Nuevo State Park. During its peak season from December through March, hundreds of elephant

seals are joined by thousands of curious human tourists who flock to the park. Guiding visitors to see the elephant seals and ensuring their contact is remote and safe requires more than 200 volunteer docents, who are organized to set out on tours every 20 minutes.

In all likelihood, state parks will further rely on their volunteers as they determine how to deal with new budget cuts that are guaranteed to erode park services. The aid of volunteers is invaluable, Pennell said, but their help cannot be a substitute for trained professionals.

"Rangers have more knowledge than any of us, and they're peace officers," she

said. "We're mostly limited to the educational aspects of the parks."

Conway agrees that her role at Fitzgerald is mostly to teach — but especially with children, being a teacher is a role she values tremendously.

"For me, this lets me be a fourth-grader all over again," Conway said. "At this point in my life, I get to choose what to do.

"And I choose this," she said. ✕