

Jen Rice: Moving on, leaving a legacy
Written by Don Allan

After 15 years working with the Natural Resources Services Division of RCAA, Jen Rice was lured away by an offer too good to refuse. Jen was encouraged to apply for a position with the Humboldt Area Foundation as the Director of Community Strategies, and she was the successful applicant. While others have tried to persuade Jen to come work for them over the years, she resisted the temptation because she truly wants to be working for the benefit of the community and those other jobs could not offer her what RCAA and NRS offered – until now. The HAF job will allow her to access foundations and potentially attract funding to Humboldt County to meet community needs – basically a larger array of potential funders with the potential to bring in more money to do good things for the community while engaging the community in mapping out the future they want to see for Humboldt County.

Jen started with the NR division of RCAA in 1996 as a planner and quickly made her mark on NRS. Her early projects included a variety of watershed and trail planning projects. Trail planning became her passion and she worked on planning and preparing permit applications for the Hammond Trail. When a glitch in the local coastal plan prevented the Widow White Creek Interpretive Trail from obtaining permits and going to implementation in 1998, Jen and the team used the money to build the south end of the Clam Beach section of the Hammond Trail, creating what came to be known as the Hole-in-the-Hammond. Trying to fill the hole would become a nine year odyssey, but persistence, determination, and working as a team with County staff led to an amendment of the local coastal plan to allow trails in riparian zones and paved the way for grant funding to prepare the plans, CEQA document, permits, and finally build the trail in 2007, finally eliminating the Hole-in-the-Hammond and winning a Caltrans award for Project of the Year for the collaborative effort that brought together the County, Caltrans, McKinleyville Community Services District, the New Heart Community Church, the California Conservation Corps, private landowners, and a host of suppliers and contractors.

Meanwhile there were plenty of other trail projects calling for attention and Jen and team worked on feasibility studies for the Annie-Mary Trail, the “Hammond South” connection (from the Mad River Hammond Bridge into Arcata), the Arcata- Eureka corridor, the Elk River Trail, Southern Humboldt trail planning, the Humboldt Bay Trails Feasibility Study, and other pieces of the Hammond Trail. In 2008 the State Coastal Conservancy awarded a grant to NRS, with Jen as the lead, to look into completing the California Coastal Trail through Humboldt County. The State budget crisis of 2008 temporarily halted the project and created a compressed timeline when funding was restored in 2009. Jen and team went into high gear and in record time created the Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy, assessing alternative trail routes from the north end of the County to the south. Two sections of the trail saw engineered plans developed – the Eureka Waterfront Trail and the Orick Levee Trail.

From her heavy involvement in trail planning, it might seem that that is all she did, but that was only a portion of what Jen was working on. Trail planning didn't really describe the new field that was emerging and Active Living became the name of this new program. Out of this new program emerged the Humboldt Partnership for Active Living and many new partnerships with County planners, County Public Health, and County Public Works, and working closely with the Board of Supervisors and other community leaders. Projects such as Healthy Rural Roads, the Interpretive Sign Program, Safe Routes to School, Community Gardens, and numerous other projects aimed at community engagement and promoting livable communities were led by Jen.

Jen has also played a prominent role in the evolution of the Natural Resources Services division of RCAA. She was promoted to manager in 2005 and to co-director in 2006. Jen has long been a strategic thinker and she played a significant role in developing NRS' first strategic plan in 2000 and updating the plan in 2006. As co-director, Jen was in charge of the Active Living Program and acted as the personnel manager. In the roller-coaster world of grant funding, NRS has gone through periods of expansion and contraction and in 2006-07 NRS was coming out of one of those periods of contraction and needed new staff. Jen put on her personnel manager hat and went about rebuilding the NRS team. Eight full time staff were hired over a period of just over two years and Jen mentored and trained that new staff to the point where she felt comfortable that they were ready to run without her steady guidance. Of course she is still providing guidance and looking for opportunities for NRS even though she has officially transitioned to the Humboldt Area Foundation, but we will miss her daily injection of enthusiasm and energy.