News

# Exhibit is a journey through water's role

## Museum makes a case for conservation through art, ideas and a sweeping historic view

by Rebecca Wallace / Mountain View Voice

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SLIDESHOW

11-year-old Evan Baldonado reads some of the displays from "Shaped by Water", an exhibit at the Los Altos History Museum. Photo by Veronica Weber.

A few years ago, when volunteers at the Los Altos History Museum started planning "Shaped By Water: Past, Present and Future," they had no idea how timely the exhibit would be.

The display of artwork, photos, maps, drawings, activities and multimedia shows the crucial role that water has played in Santa Clara Valley history, and the challenges that could affect the resource in the future. All this is on display during a season that's been mainly dry and warm. This month's storms notwithstanding, rainfall this year is at a low that worries many.

"I feel it strongly this year. I feel this sense of internal distress about how dry it's been," exhibit chair Linda Gass said.

But in the history museum, the lush sound of rushing water is everpresent. An audio recording plays as visitors walk around the exhibit hall, virtually traveling through the centuries. They go from listening to tribal stories from indigenous people -- who used the creek and Bay waters for drinking, bathing, fishing and cooking -- to reading about modern-day Peninsulans who are restoring native plants and recycling graywater from showers.

Along the way, visitors are continually reminded of man's growing impact on the environment, as a growing population uses more and more water: in ranching and agriculture, industry and cities. According to an exhibit press release, over the years the Santa Clara Valley has gone from "being self-sufficient using local water to 50-100 percent reliant on imported water."

Gass hopes visitors will walk away with new ideas and energy for conserving and preserving the resource. "Because people take water for granted ... we really need an educated public," she said.

Gass, a full-time Los Altos artist who has her workspace at Cubberley Studios in Palo Alto, has long focused on these issues. Her art quilts depict San Francisco Bay, water-treatment plants, rivers and other bodies of water that have been affected -- or drained -- by human activity. In her land art, she has arranged fabric outside to depict water that has been lost.

So when Gass, a member of the Los Altos History Museum, heard that the museum was planning a show about water, she offered her help. "The next thing I knew, I was in charge."

She added: "They were looking for a novel way to tell the story of the local history, of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills, using a different angle, water. I took the locally focused idea and expanded it into the whole Santa Clara Valley. Of course, we know that water has no boundaries. Everybody drinks water that comes from far away."

One display in the exhibit centers on this fact. A visitor can push a button for his or her city on the "Where Does Your Water Come From?" display and learn from a light-up map that it comes from the Sierra Nevada Mountains, or perhaps the Central Valley Project.

While Gass has curated art exhibitions, this was her first time directing an educational show. With help from Jane Reed, who has curated many shows at the museum, Gass assembled an exhibit committee at the end of 2010.

Apart from a few graphic designers and others who were paid for their work, Gass and her team were all volunteers. Several staff members from the City of Palo Alto helped develop and build the exhibit; tribal consultant Chuck Striplen aided in the section on indigenous people; and retired Palo Alto Weekly editor Jay Thorwaldson edited the exhibit text. The Santa Clara Valley Water District and local water companies helped fact-check.

Unsurprisingly, the artist-chair led an effort with a definite artistic flair. "I understand how art has a way to touch people emotionally when other things may not," Gass said. "We wanted to create a feeling of love for water within people."

There are several works of art in the show, including "Barreled by Plastic," an "eco-sculpture" by Kathleen Egan. Empty plastic bottles -- from juice, water, dish soap, sports drinks -- are arranged in a swoop around a surfboard where kids like to stand and have their pictures taken.

"In just three weeks, surfers collected the plastic bottles," the artwork card reads.

Another piece is "46,000 And Counting," by Judith Selby Lang (who also made "Lawn Bowls," now on Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto) and her husband David Lang. Pieces of plastic debris that washed up on the beach dangle in the museum window.

The exhibit has also had several hands-on components. In a section called "Creek Stories," visitors write down memories of playing in and around local creeks, many of which don't have the wildlife they once did. Kids can crawl into a playhouse that has succulent plants growing on the roof, demonstrating how a "green roof" can retain and filter rainwater, helping reduce Bay pollution.

Offsite projects associated with the exhibits include "Watershed Sculpture at Adobe Creek: An Inquiry into Ecological Restoration." Under the guidance of artist Daniel McCormick, about 70 volunteers helped restore an eroded creek bank in Los Altos in January by building his criss-cross willow-and-wattle sculpture.

The museum partnered with the environmental group Acterra on the project. Acterra workers had removed an invasive non-native plant from the area and had been mulling over what to do with the bank, Gass said.

As part of the sculpture, willow stakes have been put into the ground and watered. "Ultimately this will grow into a willow thicket," Gass said, adding that in time nature will also help restore the bank with silt and other materials. In time, the human hand behind "Watershed Sculpture" will become invisible, she said. "It will become a natural creek bank, like it should be."

The deeper environmental message behind the works of art may likewise go unobserved by some of the youngest museum visitors. But it doesn't mean they can't have a good time.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, a boy ran excitedly around the exhibit's labyrinth of river stones. His mother gently corrected him: "This is a meditation path. You walk it and meditate."

Gamely, the boy stopped, put his hands in the namaste position and bowed. A few seconds later, he was off running again.

No one else was in the labyrinth, so there was still room for his mother to softly walk her own section and study the quotes posted on small signs. One from "Poor Richard's Almanac" read, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water."

*"Shaped by Water: Past, Present and Future," a multimedia exhibit about the role of water in the Santa Clara Valley's history and future, at Los Altos History Museum, 51 S. San Antonio Road. Through April 22, open Thursday through Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. Free admission. For more about the exhibit, go to losaltoshistory.org.*

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