

# LONG BEACH LEGENDS



(From left to right) Dale Whitney, Mark Smerkanich, Ramon Rodriguez, Kamadi Grimbél, & David Cundiff in Dale's backyard garden.

## Reverend Dale Whitney Fights for Social Justice

By Theresa Marino

**R**everend Dale Whitney has lived and worked in the Bluff Heights neighborhood for nearly 50 years. After graduating from a Presbyterian seminary and being ordained in Santa Barbara in 1970, Dale moved to Long Beach in late 1971. He took the position of interim pastor at the Geneva Presbyterian Church, built in 1914 at the corner of 3rd and Molino. In 1972, he was elected pastor of Geneva Church and led the congregation for more than 17 years. He resigned in 1989 to become the manager of the Harbor Area Farmer's Markets. Geneva Church continued under a new pastor until 1996, when the congregation had dwindled due to low attendance and the passing of many faithful members. The building was eventually sold to the Cambodian Buddhists and is now a thriving, beautiful Buddhist temple.



Reverend Dale lived in an apartment at 4th Street and Park Avenue across from the Colorado Lagoon from 1972 to 1976. In 1977, he bought his 1918 Craftsman bungalow on Orizaba Avenue and 3rd Street. He has lived there ever since, making constant minor upgrades. He continues to host monthly potlucks, requiring masks and social distancing. These potlucks started in 1977 and were held along with bluegrass concerts in the Geneva Churchyard through 1984. The church also hosted a number of popular community groups in its facilities, including the Alliance for Survival, the Housing Action Association, a local preschool and Headstart site, the Women's Community Resource Center, and Long Beach Area Citizens Involved.

During his 17 years at Geneva, Dale led his congregation by example with the Presbyterian Social Justice doctrine, which was to get involved in the larger community where there was poverty, high unemployment, and the need for the development of young leadership. Along with Rod Martin, one of the church Elders, and his family, Dale and other Geneva members volunteered during the early 1970s at the East Long Beach Neighborhood Center, which was located at Anaheim Street and Junipero Avenue. The center was a "War on Poverty" federally-funded program to alleviate poverty and produce a better quality of life for people living in low-income neighborhoods in Long Beach. A concern for social justice was not new to Dale: he and an old high school buddy had picked lemons with the Braceros in Carpinteria near Santa Barbara for 67 cents an hour in the 1960s.

Dale has been a consummate volunteer and organizer. He's been involved with projects like the LB Food Bank, the annual CROP Hunger Walk (which celebrated 45 consecutive years in 2019), farmer's markets, and a community garden that provides fresh produce to feed the homeless, to name a few. He has been an active member of the LB Rotary Club for about 10 years. Dale is especially proud of his participation over the last three years in a Rotary-sponsored program where volunteers assist second graders with their English reading skills at Luther Burbank School. He's also served as Chair of the Community Action Committee of the Long Beach Area Council of Churches for many years.

In 1989, when Dale was hired by the South Coast Interfaith Council as the manager of the Harbor Area Farmers' Markets (HAFM), there were only three certified farmers' markets

in Long Beach. The first one began on July 4, 1980, in the parking lot of the First Congregational Church at 3rd Street and Cedar Avenue. It still occurs downtown every Friday. In 1983, the second market opened on Saturdays at the Dooley's Hardware Mart at Del Amo and Long Beach Blvd.; it is now located in Cerritos. The third market opened on Thursdays in 1985 in San Pedro, but is now held in Bixby Knolls at 46th Street and Atlantic Avenue.

Under Dale's direction, HAFM opened three more markets, which brought quality, farm-fresh fruits and vegetables to the community. Eventually, fresh fish, bakery items, hot food vendors, and much more were available at the markets. In 1997, the Sunday market opened at the Alamitos Bay Marina; it's still thriving as the most popular and frequented farmer's market in Long Beach.

From 1989 to 2016, Dale coordinated the establishment and setup of the HAFM markets and was the troubleshooter for all logistics and problems. His natural love for people, his dedication to social justice causes, and his ability to solve complex issues as a mediator made him the perfect person for the job. Dale has always been folksy and down to earth. He inherited his sense of humor from his parents, who brought him as a baby from his native Nebraska to Southern California in the middle of WWII. During his time in working in the markets, Dale was always seen in his big straw hat, giving out raffle tickets to all for the free produce drawing. He always had a booming "howdy and welcome!" to all who attended these joyful events.



Retiring from the farmers' markets in 2016 has not slowed Reverend Dale down one bit! Four years ago, he had his backyard torn up to install a French drain to ensure the proper runoff of rainwater, which always flooded his old "made for Model Ts" garage. His tenant and friend Dr. David Cundiff, an organic gardener, encouraged Dale to take advantage of the torn-up yard and put in an organic garden. The idea attracted the attention of Ramon Rodriguez, a Master Gardener connected with Long Beach Organic. The garden was dug and planted by a group of neighborhood volunteers helping Ramon with the work. A large portion of its harvest of pesticide-free fruits and vegetables is regularly donated to the Homeless Drop-in Center at the First Congregational Church. In an important way, this completes a "perfect circle" for Reverend Dale, who actually served on the site location committee for the original Friday farmer's market when it was being planned during the year 1979...on exactly that same piece of First Congregational real estate!

Following Covid-19 guidelines, Dale still loves to host potlucks at his home for friends, former congregants, garden volunteers, and former co-workers from the farmers' markets. And upon request, he'll dig out his old straw hat and belt out that folksy "howdy folks, and welcome!"

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*Theresa Marino, Retired Bureau Manager, City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, sits on the Marine Advisory Commission and is the Founding Executive Director of Conservation Corps of Long Beach where she is President of the Board. She was a community organizer from CSULB during the 1970s War on Poverty era. She lives in Bluff Heights with her house and gardening mate Mingo and their two cats.*