

Rancho Los Alamitos Volunteers – Committed, Connected, Community

By Ambyr Hardy, RLA Education Associate & Volunteer Coordinator

It is one of my greatest honors to coordinate the volunteer efforts at Rancho Los Alamitos Historic Ranch & Gardens. As an applied anthropologist with a background in social networks and social support, this work has been a fantastic opportunity to experience firsthand the power of "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens" making a big difference in their community (quote attributed to Margaret Mead).

"The Rancho" has been welcoming the public for 50 years, since the Bixby family - the most recent owner-occupants - donated the site to the City of Long Beach, CA in 1968. The historic site sits upon *Povuu'ngna*, sacred Tongva land, and today includes the ancient shell midden of the ancestors. Tours also include the adobe ranch house, which evolved over two centuries, a restored barnyard complete with livestock, and 4.5 acres of historic gardens lovingly referred to as Florence Bixby's "outdoor rooms." The Rancho is committed to telling the diverse stories of the region. This year, programming will be rooted in a 2-year research project conducted by volunteers and interns, highlighting stories of women throughout history to honor the centennial celebration of women's suffrage.

The so-called "island in time" continues to welcome thousands of visitors and school children annually to explore local history. To do this vital work, we rely upon the perpetual dedication of a robust volunteer program. All Rancho Volunteers are part of the Volunteer Service Council (VSC), and their work supports the Rancho's mission, vision, and values by contributing around 10,000 hours per year in a number of service areas. Volunteer service includes welcoming guests and Docent-guided tours, educating visitors, supporting our public programs and special events with authentic hospitality (including our now-virtual programming), research and curatorial support, weekly gardeners, and more.

With around 200 active volunteers we appreciate the efforts of a dedicated volunteer leadership council, the VSC Steering Committee (SC). The SC includes appointed Service Area Volunteer Representatives who meet monthly with staff to ensure that the non-profit foundation, volunteers, and public are being well served. The SC Reps act as liaisons between their area volunteers and staff, communicating official information and ensuring all volunteers are heard. Collaboration is one of the Rancho's structural strengths, and the volunteers and SC leaders are integral to the system.

Keeping volunteers and visitors engaged during a global pandemic has been no small challenge for Rancho Los Alamitos, like many other organizations that rely upon their volunteers to thrive. As the world "shut down" in March of 2020, we, too, scrambled to find the best way to take care of our most valued resource- our Volunteers! First and foremost, our commitment was to keep our volunteers, staff, and visitors safe. Working with the Steering Committee, we developed a strategy to connect with every one of our nearly 200 volunteers by phone. Staff and the volunteer leaders helped make dozens of calls each, ensuring that our volunteers had what they needed during this difficult time, and let them know how much we missed them. In the ensuing months, we continued to strategize personal connection, even when the Rancho could reopen on a limited scale, but with many fewer volunteers actively volunteering onsite.

As we grappled with the challenges of a global pandemic, we have explored new ways to stay connected with our volunteers. Our volunteers are a close-knit social group and life during a pandemic can be isolating. While there could be no annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner- an important component of our volunteer recognition program- we focused our energies on continued phone calls, along with greeting cards from staff, the E.D., and BoD sharing our gratitude. We have also continued our bi-monthly VSC meetings on Saturday mornings. To show appreciation for our volunteers during this difficult time, we include time for “mixing and mingling” during the zooms. Volunteers love to show and share what BYO they’re enjoying (muffins, coffee, mimosas...) and sometimes we incorporate fun themes so they can dress up (optional). Social time is followed by enriching content, such as virtual tours of other museums, lectures, and more. We remain hopeful and are thinking creatively about how to have an appreciation event this year, where we can resume honoring our volunteers and awarding their efforts.

We additionally added some new virtual volunteer opportunities to the menu this year. Volunteer leaders and education staff developed a weekly online reading group, through which we explored and analyzed texts related to the site and interpretive materials. Volunteers read and discussed chapters of the book, *Rancho Los Alamitos: Ever Changing Always the Same*, and our interpretive plan. We also relied heavily upon our School Docents to help create and facilitate our first-ever virtual field trips. Getting folks on board for virtual connection required a bit of training and some prodding for those resistant to technology. However, after months of "zooming," many of the volunteers actually found it fun, and through their encouragement, even more volunteers were connecting by the end of the year.

With the help of volunteers, Rancho public programming has also evolved during the past year, and we now have a variety of virtual programs allowing us to connect with the public. These include a [Virtual Visits](#) tab on our website featuring activities and stories- many developed by volunteers- and continual work on improving our outreach and social media strategies. One project in-process aims to highlight volunteers sharing Rancho stories and will allow guests “behind the scenes” virtually.

Perhaps most markedly, our school tours are getting virtual makeovers. In our revised 4th-grade *Footprints on the Land* virtual field trip, docents engage students live while other volunteers help manage the zoom program from home. Notably, these virtual tours served twice as many schools and children as in previous years, highlighting the value and accessibility of a virtual school tour program.

In addition to these volunteer-centric virtual programs, we are in the process of creating an asynchronous version of our 3rd-grade *Tovaave: A Tongva Cultural Program*. Working with local Tongva educators and a Video Production Intern, we are producing a series of asynchronous videos. These will include several student videos rooted in Tongva core values and a teacher orientation, helping educators teach about indigenous peoples with cultural relativism and sensitivity. The virtual *Tovaave* tour will be available this spring. It will continue to be offered alongside our in-person field trips when we go back to onsite tours in the future, allowing the Rancho to reach more students with this unique cultural program.

Lessons learned from working with volunteers include a deeper understanding of how valuable mutual benefit is. While volunteer hours save the Rancho money- their efforts are equivalent to about five full-time staff- more importantly, they contribute to our mission. Volunteers *inspire our community, educate and engage visitors with our rich history, and authentically connect guests to California's past by sharing our compelling stories*. In exchange, we attempt to recognize their efforts by honoring their wisdom, to value their experience and talents, and appreciate the values they bring to our team.

The Rancho's VSC is perhaps the most dedicated group of people I've ever worked with. It is a great pleasure to work with committed, passionate folks and facilitate their joy and peace in return for their gifts.

About the Author:

In addition to being the mother of two spectacular kids, Ambyr Hardy MA works part-time as the Rancho Los Alamitos Education Associate and Volunteer Coordinator and is also a part-time Anthropology Professor. Her work focuses on social networks and social capital, gender and identity, and American Indian Studies. Ambyr is ultimately interested in how humans come together for collaborative problem-solving.

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