



♪♪ Happy Trails To You...

Mary Ann and Ron Webster



By Tony Garofalo
Photography By Robert Staley

ONCE UPON A TIME...not very long ago, the Santa Monica Mountains were pristine, save for the fire roads. There was no winding swath of connecting pathways from which hikers could enjoy native plants and wildflowers; the waterfalls and ocean views.

There were almost no trails until someone built them. That someone was Ron Webster.

"Nice to meet you, Ron," I say.

"You don't know that yet," replies the nimble-witted, local legend, who right off gets me thinking, *Can you say 'feisty', boy and girls?*

Mary Ann Webster, a sprightly octogenarian, has just returned to her cozy Culver City home after participating in Saturday trail maintenance at Will Rogers State Historic Park, a weekly ritual of the Santa Monica Mountains Trail Crew ten months of the year. The Massachusetts native and UCLA graduate was a longtime teacher of ESL (English as a Second Language) and a high school counselor. These days Mary Ann teaches a class on Antiques and takes one on Shakespeare.

Ron Webster grew up in a small town in northern Wisconsin, leaving high school before graduating, earning a GED in Korea during the war. "I may not have a high school diploma, but I married two women with master's degrees from UCLA," Ron says with pride and a note of irony.

Now 85, Webster became one of the original members of the Sierra Club's *Santa Monica Mountains Task Force* in 1972. Since there were virtually no trails in the mountains, he led hikers on the dirt fire roads in order to build a constituency energized about protecting open space for recreation.

"The mountains are surrounded by a huge city, a perfect target for developers, tough people with lots of money behind them," Mary Ann points out. "The Task Force was created as an environmental watchdog.

Mary Ann Webster served as Chair of the Task Force for more than 15 years and is currently Conservation Chair. "I have been deeply into political issues in the mountains and am proud of our success in protecting open space from massive development and the legal battles we've won on the issue," she relates.

Though California State Parks acquired the land that became Topanga State Park – which at 11,000 acres became the largest parkland in the country within city limits - it was still largely inaccessible to hikers, as

it contained wide fire roads open to vehicles. Enter Ron Webster with a plan to build trails that were friendly to hikers of all ages.

In Ron Webster, the Task Force had a modern-day Daniel Boone and tapped the trailblazer to lead the charge. Ron set out to build a trail at Topanga State Park and took a course in Trail Building 101 from a State Park engineer.

"He taught me the flagging system," Ron tells me. "You tie these flags eye to eye, you see? And you go up to a flag, made of red tape, and you put your eye on the flag, and where your feet are is where the trail is."

Mary Ann smiles as she recalls taking Ron's stretchy red trail tape and using it instead of ribbon on Christmas presents. "It wasn't all that hard figuring out whose gifts were who's under the tree," she admits with a chuckle.

Using the flagging system, Ron went on to finish designing and building his first trail, from Trippet Ranch to Musch Ranch, with the help of the newly formed *Santa Monica Mountains Trail Crew*. In a few short years it became the most popular trail in the Santa Monica Mountains.

In short order, Webster established himself as a master designer and builder of trails. He could stand on the high point of a mountain and see where the trail should start and finish. His characteristic modesty prompted Jane Leonard, a relative, to describe his unique skill.

"Ron has an innate ability to see a trail on barren land. He understands the grade, the scope – it's almost as if he sees the landscape from an eagle's perspective," Leonard shares. "It's not something everybody can do. His perception of the lay of the land is really a gift."

Since I'm not used to saying the word trail, unless it is followed by the word mix, it was hard for me to relate to the trail building process until the following day, when my online research revealed an 18-minute video called *Building the Garapito Trail*.

Lifetime Achievement Award for
Master Trail Builder

The short film presents a revealing look at the grueling work of volunteers and stars Ron Webster in his signature role – designing, aligning and building trails while coaching a crew on how to clear the path.

Taking a hike back to 1983, it was on New Year's Day of that year that Mary Ann Kieve set out to fulfill a resolution to help volunteers build and maintain trails. "I was driven by the politics of it and wanted

Mary Ann and Ron's wedding day



to meet like-minded people," she recalls. So how did that work out? It was the day she first set eyes on the creator and director of the Trail Crew – her liked-minded future husband.

Three years and countless trail hours later, the pair decided to exchange vows at the site of Ron's first trail adventure - Trippet Ranch in Topanga State Park. However, they arrived to find the entrance closed due to a Red Flag Alert, warning of possible wildfires. That special day was saved by the Parks Supervisor - a friend and invited guest, who had the gates opened, setting the stage for a wedding designed by nature, amid the beauty of oak groves and meadows – a ceremony out on the trail, symbolic of the Webster's journey together.

Culver City residents may have hiked on a Ron Webster Special without knowing it. At *Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area* - aka 'LA's Central Park,' hikers traverse spectacular pathways that showcase spectacular views of downtown LA and the ocean, seven of which were built by the man himself, including *City View Trail* and *Ron's Trail*. The Webster's have a special fondness for the 387-acre parkland.

"I think it's important to have trails built in the diverse community that surrounds Kenny Hahn Park," Mary Ann says. "It's a playground for the old and young, from people of all backgrounds, anyone and everyone." Adds Ron, "It's the perfect alternative for residents who might not have the opportunity or knowledge to hike or walk on trails in the Santa Monica Mountains."

Ron and Mary Ann are humbled by the numerous awards and accolades accorded them by the Sierra Club and conservation groups. The couple received the Sierra Club's *Weldon Heald Conservation Award*, the highest such honor conferred by the Angeles Chapter. This past year Ron Webster accepted the *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council.

Arguably the crowning achievement in Ron Webster's service to the Santa Monica Mountains trails system, is the designing and building of more than 30 percent of the 67-mile Backbone Trail, an uninterrupted connection between Will Rogers State Park in



Mary Ann and Jane Leonard, daughter-in-law



June, 2016. Ron Webster (2nd from left) gives a hand to former Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who makes it official, cutting the ribbon at the designation of the Backbone Trail as a "National Trail."

Pacific Palisades and Point Mugu State Park in Ventura County.

The decades-long project was a collaboration between public and private donations and hundreds upon hundreds of hands-in-the-dirt hours by the likes of Webster and the Task Force and Trail Crew, moving forward inch by inch, mile after mile, over a period of some 40 years.

In June of 2016, the National Park Service held an official opening and dedication of the beloved Backbone Trail at Will Rogers State Park, where the hikers' paradise was designated as a "National Trail," a prestigious and rare designation."

Among the celebrants were former Governor

Arnold Schwarzenegger and fitness mogul Betty Weider, co-owners of a 40-acre parcel donated in order to make one of the final connections needed for the uninterrupted trail. The property, valued at more than \$500,000, represents the single largest private donation for the Backbone Trail.

The Websters were front and center at the dedication, with Ron among a small group brought forth to participate in the ribbon cutting and invited to the podium to speak about his extraordinary work on the Backbone Trail.

The Webster's have instilled their love of the land in their combined family of six children, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Oh, then there's Bruno, one tantalizing, nine-year-old orange tabby, rescued in the wild at two days old, formerly feral, now the household big shot and the love of their lives.

Now Ron and Mary Ann are working to ensure that the torch is passed to future generations – to make sure that those who follow become stewards of trails, the environment and the ecosystem.

"I don't believe in a lot of things, but I believe that in wildness is the preservation of the world," Ron says, quoting poet and naturalist, Henry David Thoreau.

One colleague called Ron "probably the most important individual contributing to the development of hundreds of miles of trails in the largest urban park in the nation."

And how, I ask, would Ron Webster sum up his decades of contributions to the mountains? He answers with typical Webster wit: "People walk on my best work."

If you're interested in walking on Ron Webster's best work and would like to volunteer with the trail crew on Saturday mornings from 8:30am until 1:00pm, contact the Trail Work Coordinator at rachel.dorman@gmail.com.

TV writer-producer Tony Garofalo is an Emmy Award-winner and a veteran of such classics as The Merv Griffin Show, The People's Court and Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.