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Bay Nature Local Heroes

Local Heroes 2024: Kellyx Nelson, Conservation Action Hero

by [Anushuya Thapa](#)

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When she drives down the San Mateo County coast, Kellyx Nelson doesn't see a piece of land she hasn't touched. She sees more than 10 dams removed, 500 acres of natural and working land that support carbon sequestration, and miles of creeks and watersheds restored—and that's just the beginning of the work she's done as the executive director of the county's resource conservation district, or RCD for short.

Kellyx describes the RCD as connective tissue—a special district, created by the state, that nimbly supports other players in the landscape of conservation. Despite the RCD's size, the role inspired her. “Here's this entity that exists not to take anything from anyone, not to regulate anyone, not to shame anyone, not to litigate anyone, but to help people.” Like a hopeless romantic, she jumped ship from the Peninsula Open Space Trust, abandoning a burgeoning career inside an extremely well-funded entity to work in an office with no staff, no money, no projects, and a “very bad reputation.”

From there, Kellyx *became* the San Mateo Resource Conservation District. And 18 years later, with a growing staff of 26 and a budget nearing \$19 million, she's still seen by some as its symbol.

“People always give me the impossible projects,” Kellyx says. Like the restoration of Pescadero Marsh, a thorny problem whose brackish waters had brought about a standstill mix of conflicting interests, differing jurisdictions, and pointing fingers. The key, she says, is listening, and taking an all-inclusive view of conservation: she sees farmers as stewards and thinks conservationists, developers, and even people who hate “enviros” can work together. “You don't have to choose between the people and the land.”

The real enemy, she says, is bureaucracy. Getting a restoration project permitted, funded, and

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Kellyx doesn't think it should. In 2019, she helped found the Cutting Green Tape initiative, which has brought together federal agencies and nonprofits to discuss making restoration work easier. The species they're protecting, like steelhead and red-legged frogs, "don't know what jurisdiction it is," Kellyx says. "News flash—birds fly, and frogs hop, and fish swim." And they should get to do so freely.

Kellyx is a connector, even from her living room. Our conversation, happening across a repurposed children's play table, is interrupted frequently. Neighbors come by to drop off their kids. Her own kids make calls to their friends. She often takes them hiking in the Sierra, or camping in Joshua Tree, or road-tripping across the country to national parks. "I guess if I have an image of myself, it's always with kids and the outdoors, even though it's not what I'm doing anymore."

Or maybe it is, but with grown-ups and a little closer to home.

are changing Bay Area nature and communities for the better. "These are folks who speak with their actions and choices over days, years, and decades and motivate us all to do the same," writes our editor in chief, Victoria Schlesinger. Here are profiles of the 2024 award winners:

Yakuta Poonawalla, Community Hero Award

Katharyn Boyer, Environmental Educator Award

Naji Lockett, Young Leader Award

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About the Author

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Nature's project tracking federal money for nature. Before that, she left her hometown of Kathmandu to study journalism at Northwestern University, and has written for InvestigateWest, The Harvey World Herald, and The Daily Northwestern. Outside of the newsroom, you can find her dancing salsa decently well, or playing chess very poorly.