

## Cathy Turner, Conservation Champion



Along the lines of the adage “it takes a village to raise a child,” it also takes a lot of people with a variety of skills to keep a non-profit organization going. Cathy Turner is a case in point. She’s definitely gotten her hands dirty pulling ivy, but her strength is in organization and data management – two vital functions for any non-profit.

Turner grew up in Salem, and after spending time out of state, she and her husband’s work brought them to Portland. Their search for a new home ended in a neighborhood near the Terwilliger Parkway. It seemed to them that living near a forest, but still within walking distance of stores, buses and the

downtown area, was quintessentially Portland.

She was no stranger to the woods. Turner grew up camping with her family and taking long hikes with her father. While she’s always been interested in conservation, her involvement has primarily been staggered around responsibilities of family and work. Turner says she’s always been a “number cruncher,” spending most of her working years as a life insurance actuary.

Her local conservation work began in the early 1990s when the northwest was embroiled in a controversy over timber harvesting and protection of Northern spotted owl habitat. Portland was front and center in that debate, hosting experts from around the country for a nationwide timber summit organized by the Clinton administration. Closer to home, Turner says some old growth fir trees were discovered on a few acres just a few miles north of Forest Park in a larger path of forest, which provided a wildlife corridor all the way from the coast range into Forest Park. The lumber company that owned the land wanted to cut them. She read up on the issue, connected with an organization that was raising money to save the old growth, and ended up co-chairing the fundraising drive.

The idea, Turner says, was that after they purchased the land in question, they would turn it over to Multnomah County. The fund-raising and purchase was successful, but the Forest Park Conservancy still owns the land and provides supervised hikes through the area in seasons that will not disturb nesting bald eagles. It was during this time she met fellow Conservation Champion Robin Vesey. Following the conclusion of that project, Turner joined the board of Friends of Forest Park (now Forest Park Conservancy), serving one year as President and working on a variety of administrative projects.

Then she went back to full-time employment and volunteering took a back seat. Fast forward to her retirement in 2012 when Turner had more time on her hands. She got involved in Friends of Terwilliger, serving as its Board Treasurer for 4 years, organizing their contacts lists and data banks and starting a newsletter. Turner was also the group’s representative to the West Willamette Restoration Partnership, the organization involved in a community listening project in 2015 in SW Portland to define a neighborhood vision for future conservation activities. As part of this project, Turner and others listened to homeowners’ concerns about conservation and found they were receptive to the work but often lacked either the time or the money to get rid of invasive species on their own property. She found that

unless an organization is persistent in following up with residents, interest wanes and not much gets done. You have to do more than handing out pamphlets and directing folks to resources, she says. The key is to keep the time commitment to a minimum and provide incentives such as paid work crews or funds for native plants. Turner also believes that partnering is a good idea because connecting residents to local groups who have the resources may just be the key to their participation, even if the groups do ask for a small fee to get the work done. Finally, she says homeowners are much more interested in getting involved if they know their neighbors are signed up and that a grant is already secured for the project. She gives a lot of credit to fellow volunteer Robin Vesey, who demonstrated to neighbors through her own tireless work that pulling ivy and planting native species were worthwhile efforts.

Closer to home, Turner works in her own yard pulling ivy and other invasive weeds. She enjoys the work and being outside. It's satisfying to see progress made, especially in the effort to get rid of English ivy. At first, she says, Friends of Terwilliger spent all their time pulling ivy from the trees in Terwilliger Parkway but now she hears that the organization is involved in pulling ivy on the ground, and that is very gratifying.

As far as the future goes, Turner is hopeful but recognizes that removing ivy and other invasive species is an ongoing battle. When she's out working along trails in the parkway, you hear from both sides; many people say "thank you" as they walk or run by but occasionally someone will tell volunteers it's a waste of time to pull ivy. Turner says it's hard to change someone's opinion very quickly, but they just ask them to look at the top of Hamilton Street and see what's happened to the flourishing Eagle Point area now that it's free of ivy and other invasive species.

Turner and her husband are thinking of downsizing and she's trying to wrap her head around being in a space where they can't just go out the back door for a walk in the woods. She muses that it may take a while to find a smaller place where they can still be connected to the natural world.