

## LET IT BE:

# POTTER RANCH CONSERVES VAST LANDSCAPE

Kevin League

**WHEN DOUG POTTER'S FATHER** came back from World War II, he wanted to farm. The trouble was, he didn't have a ranch or money to buy one. Doug's grandparents, however, had nearly paid off their property on the Spokane Hills east of Helena, which they had acquired in the early 1900s. "My grandparents took a deeded indenture on their property so my father could farm," recalled Doug at a recent hearing before the Lewis and Clark County commissioners.

Doug's father, in turn, purchased his own ranch, adjacent to his parents'

place. "It really meant something to my grandfather. Doug's uncles did the same and in time the Potter spread was assembled. "They wanted to make a better life for their family," Doug said. "They went about it by acquiring more land ... to keep hold of it. We have held on to it the best we could."

"The proposal before you is something we believe in. This property should be kept in one piece, in perpetuity," explained Doug. The three commissioners agreed and voted unanimously to open a 30-day public comment on whether or not to

commit around one million dollars of the county's Open Space Bond money to the easement acquisition. In fact, the commissioners were so impressed by Prickly Pear Land Trust's presentation that they suggested "the candor" of the process should serve as a model to similar proposals across the state.

Located ten miles east of Helena, the Potter Ranch makes up a substantial portion of the Spokane Hills and is one of the few remaining working ranches of its size in the Helena Valley, explains Travis Vincent, PPLT Land Project Coordinator who worked with the Potters through the process to develop the conservation easement terms and seek funding for the project. The ranch abuts an additional 6,300 acres of BLM land, formerly the McMaster Ranch.

"The property, which steadily rises up from Spokane Creek and Spokane Creek Road, consists of grassland and mixed forest foothills, including an elevated bench where the majority of the Potter's hay production occurs," Travis wrote in PPLT's application to the county.

Early financial support from the Cinnabar Foundation and Westech Environmental's donation of in-kind services really helped us get the project off the ground. "Due diligence on a project of this scale is not cheap. It takes a lot of partners," describes Travis. The commissioners' vote was preceded by a complex evaluation by the county Citizens Advisory Committee which voted, unanimously, to recommend the proposal to the Commission. "If the Commissioners

agree to fund the project, it will be a major victory for all our partners, but more importantly for any residents who enjoy looking out their windows and seeing open space and elk habitat," Travis added. PPLT's proposal asks the county to cover two-thirds of the total appraised value of the conservation

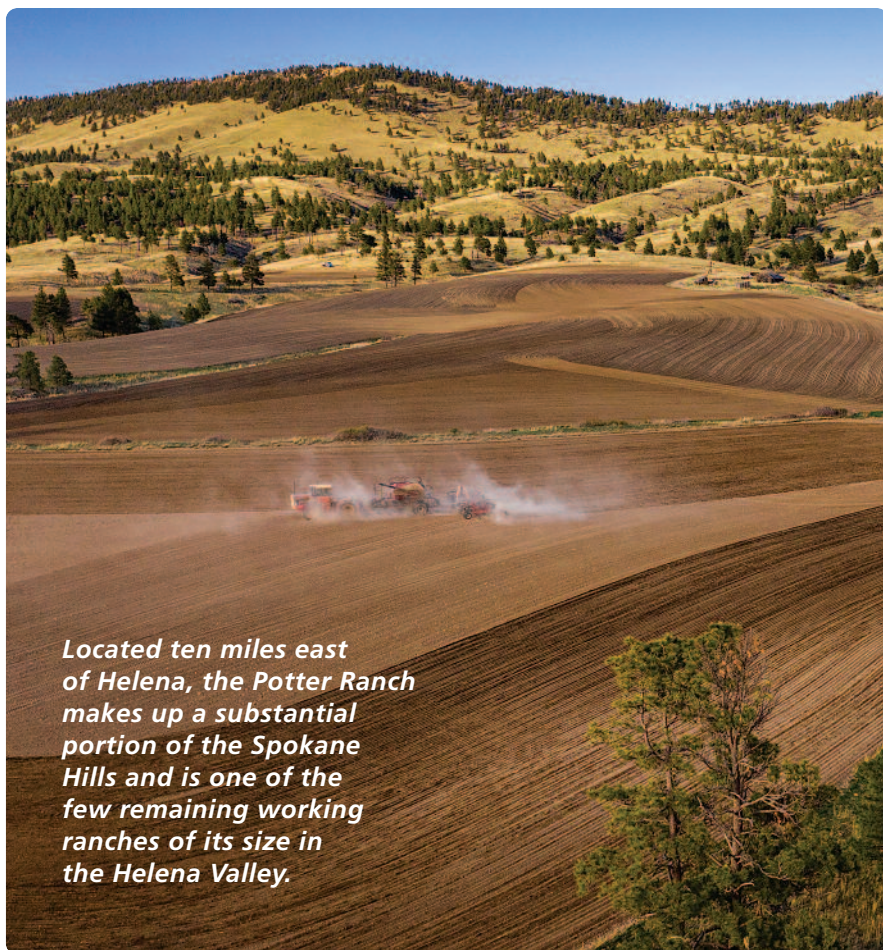
easement, and the Potter's plan to donate the rest.

His family's legacy wasn't the only motivation for Doug Potter and his wife of 36 years, Ronda. "The subdivision pressure will affect the aquifer

of the East Valley," he said in his testimony. "That (water issues) and family history is what drove me to walk into the PPLT offices years ago and express my interest in exploring the possibility of a conservation easement."

The Potter project protects more acreage than the last three Commissioner-approved projects at half the cost to the taxpayer-supported Open Space Bond. "Across Montana, only three county projects are larger, and most were completed upwards of ten years ago", testified Glenn Marx, who heads the Montana Association of Land Trusts. "The county simply won't have any other opportunities to conserve farm and ranch lands to this degree."

"I have so much faith and respect for landowners who choose to put their land into conservation easements," PPLT Executive Director Mary Hollow said in her opening comments to the Commission. To drive home the opportunity, she added, "PPLT has been doing this work for 24 years, and this is one of the best projects we've had the opportunity to pursue."



*Located ten miles east of Helena, the Potter Ranch makes up a substantial portion of the Spokane Hills and is one of the few remaining working ranches of its size in the Helena Valley.*

Kevin League

# SOLE THERAPY: A TOWN TURNS TO TRAILS

The COVID-19 pandemic crept up on all of us like a bitter spring snowstorm. But there were no thawing chinooks, no sunshine. Instead, a cautious stay-at-home statewide order from our governor caused businesses, sporting events, schools, you name it, to grind to a halt. Suddenly, our community was homebound.

During that time the trails provided great respite, escape, and healing. And the trails saw unprecedented use, despite what seemed like a never-ending series of spring snowstorms. Here's a few stories about how our community adapted by turning to the trails.

## Andy Roberts

When seventh-grade math teacher Andy Roberts could no longer convene classes at Helena Middle School last March, he created instructional videos at home. Using cans from the pantry and old pizza boxes, he demonstrated calculating the area of a circle, diameters, and radiuses.

He dearly missed the classroom. "It showed me how much we accomplish in a classroom. I was stuck in the basement. I needed a relief... to get out," Andy explained. He also had two home-bound youngsters of his own. "I love my kids, but ..."

Andy had started a fitness regimen during the winter when he'd "failed" the school district's Wellness Checkup, just barely. It was a wake up call for a guy who'd traditionally been fit. He started in the gym, but like his school, it shut down.

After a spring snow and about the time that PPLT launched its Don't Fence Me In Virtual Trail

Run & Trail Challenge, Andy thought, "I can do that." He loaded his daughter Elise, age 9, on a sled and "literally drug her to the top of Mount Ascension."

An inspiration was born. "OK, I'm going to do every single trail," he vowed. "I used the Avenza app to map the South Hills and the Plot-aRoute function to see how far I'd go." He also used the Strava app "to see that I got every trail in." He'd try to wrap up his daily treks by 8 p.m. so he could get home for the howling. By May 11, just one month after he'd begun, he'd accomplished his "every trail" mission and in the process he'd shed 40 pounds.

Last month, he passed his followup Wellness Checkup with flying colors.



*"I needed a relief... to get out."*

## Iris McClain

After morning online classes for her third-grade Hawthorne Elementary class, Iris McClain was ready to bust out. The computer learning was "OK," but "I missed my friends and my teacher." During the stay-at-home order, the nine-year-old made hikes up Mount Helena from her grandparents' home a daily and often twice-daily routine.



"I hiked with my Nan and my Pop, but mostly with my Nan," said Iris. "And always with my three dogs. I have two Jack Russells, one of them old, and a black Lab." The wildflowers and birds tutorials with her Nan were a big hit. When asked her favorite wildflower, trail, and bird, Iris has an answer for each. "The larkspur, maybe Prairie Trail, and the blue bird." When it comes to a favorite dog, she's offended.

"Of course not!" says Iris. I love my dogs. They like to make me laugh."

When she wasn't hiking Mount Helena, frequent bike outings were made to Tenmile Creek Park, more of her Pop's domain. On hot days it was fun to stop along the creek and feel the cool water.

*"I missed my friends and my teacher."*

## Krystle Gawel-Kulesa

By day, Krystle is a child and family therapist for Intermountain, a Helena non-profit mental health provider. With a heavy caseload, it's not a job that one can turn off when the work day ends. Her personal "therapy" is found in nature, and recently along the trails of Helena's South Hills, which in the past, she says, she took for granted. Her runs, she explains, are "the only time in the day I can shut my brain off and feel and be content with myself. At peace." Krystle has become a student of the connection between nature and exercise and mental health. Describing the "fight or flight" part of the brain, she explains. "Regular exercise not only reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression and ADHD, but it also aids our bodies by making our 'fight or flight' stress responses less reactive. The elevated heart rate is a healthy way to better regulate and stabilize our nervous system."

"I thought if I'm going to jump in, I might as well jump in all the way! PPLT's Don't Fence Me In Trail Challenge has pushed me to set goals ... to get out there. All our minds are busy," she explains, particularly during the uncertainty of the pandemic. "There's a void. We're all doing our best to fill that void."

*"The only time in the day I can shut my brain off and feel and be content with myself. At peace."*

Krystle's efforts in filling that void and "jumping in" have included running all of the South Hills trails and completing the 5, 12, 20 and 30k runs. "I never thought I'd run a 20k," she says. Krystle became one of the leading TrailRaisers of this year's virtual Don't Fence Me In. Krystle celebrated her weekly progress by donning a funny costume on weekends when she posts updates on Facebook, and drawing in donations from across the country from friends and family.

Her trail running, she says, "has been a lifesaver." And the significance of the organizations that maintain the trails wasn't lost on her. "The access I am privileged to enjoy right out my front door is something I do not take for granted. Trail running has been a personal lifesaver. So, yeah, I took the opportunity to trailraise for the organization that makes this possible. I feel lucky to do my part in ensuring continued access to this trail system for our community."



## Bee McLean and Rick Halverson

Rick Halverson, a decade-long PPLT member, has been an avid hiker for 10 years.

His sister, Bee McLean, not so much. Not until last fall, when Rick urged her to join him on the Mount Helena trails did she discover the opportunities out our back door. A Helenan for all of her 63 years and recently retired from a desk-bound job, Bee had never really hiked much. By December, she'd made it to the summit of Mount Helena.

"She's so much stronger now," says Rick, revealing a bit of sibling pride. "We've done all the trails on

Mount Helena. We go slow, bring the wildflower book, sit down and take a break. We're in no big hurry." They enjoy quizzing each other about wildflower species.

And what has it done for the two of them? "We've really gotten close," says Rick. Bee adds, "It has brought us back together." They're particularly thankful that their hiking habit was well-established when the pandemic hit. "Without this trail system, we'd be climbing the walls. We're so lucky," says Bee. A relative newcomer to PPLT, Bee, like her brother, has grown to love the land trust and the entire Happy Trails mantra. She's got the license plates, T-shirts and they buy trail maps for friends and family. "It has changed my life," Bee says.



*"Without this trail system, we'd be climbing the walls."*

**Because of where we live, we are all among the fortunate. We have the outdoors and our incredible trails. They came calling to trail users young and old, veteran and novice, to individuals and families.**

# THE GREEN SCREEN

## PPLT EDUCATION RE-IMAGINES TOOLS FOR THE OUTDOOR STUDENT

**THE WORD PIVOT** has seen a lot of use since COVID-19 swept across our country. It's been applied to re-thinking of businesses, government, travel and recreation and, most certainly, education. In the last couple months, PPLT's Education Coordinator, Blake Sexton, pivoted the entire education plan to meet the challenges of social distanced learning.

Blake, midway through his year-long AmeriCorps service term as a Big Sky Watershed Corps member with the land trust, had just gotten rolling with his in-the-field classrooms, serving Helena high schoolers, when the pandemic and lockdown hit. Fold up the tent? Not hardly. Instead, within weeks, he'd developed teaching videos on our bountiful wildflowers and the role pollinators play in their reproduction.

Some 150 students from Capital and Helena High schools learned about the role pollinators play in reproduction of native flowers. Having learned how

the flowers multiply and flourish, the students were given trail maps where they could observe this spring's wildflower bounty in all its glory. The exercise asked students to create a hypothesis on what type of pollinator they would expect to pollinate a native flower of their choice and explain their reasoning.

Sarah Urban, who teaches Honors Biology at Capital High, had 46 students participate. Blake encouraged them "to get outside, to go and explore," said Sarah. "Blake's assignment was the last one we gave our kids. The kids were spent, sick of online learning. Burned out." His field assignment couldn't have come at a better time," she said. The students' feedback of his program was that it was "really good, particularly given the situation." They also responded well to "an expert, and a unique situation," she added.

He also developed a fascinating webinar titled "Open Space and Flood

Resilience." The webinar linked historic floodplain regions — think the Nile and Mesopotamia — to floodplain issues and restoration in our own backyard, specifically the Sevenmile Creek Restoration project. Along the way, he explained how the choices we make in our headwaters impact downstream environmental health. Through the use of interactive online tools such as FEMA maps and a watershed viewer, Blake illustrated the recent increase in "impermeable" development within the Helena Valley floodplain, and discussed the impact this development has on increasing flood risks in the greater Helena community.

The webinar summarized findings of the Montana Climate Assessment study as well. The combination of human development and climate trends, which the assessment documents, compounds nature's challenges when it comes to early snowmelt and peak spring runoff. "When human development transforms



*Some 150 students from Capital and Helena High schools learned about the role pollinators play in reproduction of native flowers.*

nature rapidly, the environment does not have time to naturally react," says Blake. The webinar has been shared with more than 50 members of the public as well as high schoolers who received extra credit by viewing it.

While COVID-19 has provided the ability to experiment and hone educational lessons in new and creative ways utilizing virtual means, PPLT can't wait to work again with young learners in some hands-on experiential learning. This program was created to further PPLT's mission of inspiring connections to our lands and waters for both the present and future. It might take a bit, but we'll be back out there soon.

In the meantime, don't forget to tune in! **Check out PPLT's educational materials and videos online at [pricklypearlt.org/project/environment-education](https://pricklypearlt.org/project/environment-education).**

## PUTTING THE BEAT IN BEATEN PATH: THE SOUTH HILLS TRAILS WEATHER THE STORM

**IT WASN'T AN EASY SPRING** for the South Hills trails.

It almost could be described as a "perfect storm" for trail wear and tear. The March and April snow storms brought with them four cycles of freeze-thaw. Just when the trails were passable without cleats or spikes, along came another storm ... then the treacherous ice, followed by peanut butter-like mud. Again and again and again. Most trail users take a break during these cycles. Not so in 2020 when we home-bound Helenans were restless and anxious to get outside, breathe fresh air, stretch the legs, or take a respite from one another.

Prickly Pear staffers, notably Nate Kopp, Emmett Purcell and Blake Sexton, wondered about the trail damage and

thus launched an assessment of 40 miles of city trails. "The trails are in pretty darn good shape," concluded Nate. "For the most part they held up." Trail maintenance requires managing two things, Nate says: water and people.

Water causes trail erosion. Foot and bike traffic can compound erosion by penetrating the mud and navigating around the mud and ice patches. Nate suggests that when social distancing, simply step six feet to the side and stop to allow others to pass, rather than off-trail hiking or biking.

But the land trust doesn't regret any of the hard use the trails received. "Given the challenges, the unknowns, a little extra maintenance is a welcomed cost," said Mary Hollow, Executive

Director, "...to help people maintain their happiness and sanity, we're glad to do it." The staffers' work included flattening trails. "If the angle is too extreme, users move to the edge of the trail," says Nate, expanding the trail "tread." Not good, as the entire tread should be 18–24 inches wide. They also trimmed brush and trees as overgrown trails also lead to erosion-causing diversions.

At the same time, the trail crew inventoried signage on the city land, which includes over 170 signs, ranging from directional ones to dog signs and trailhead and kiosk signs. They checked sign plate conditions and improved or replaced sign posts. (Their efforts continue this summer with the Forest Service trails.)



**Prickly Pear staffers Nate Kopp (right) and Blake Sexton replace a trail sign post.**

In typical years, a variety of volunteer groups contribute to trail maintenance. COVID-19 shelved that. But the Montana Conservation Corps stepped up to "absorb a summer with less volunteer work," says Nate. Corps teams contributed to six full days of trail work which "allowed us not to miss a beat."

## FIVE YEARS OF VISION AND HEART

### PPLT CELEBRATES MARY HOLLOW'S LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

**TENMILE CREEK PARK**, Prickly Pear Creek Greenway, Sevenmile Creek restoration, Gehring Ranch, Mount Helena's LeGrande addition, Brooklyn Bridge, the Welch Ranch conservation easement, Potter Ranch easement and several new trails. These conservation and trails accomplishments are likely known to readers of this newsletter.

These are the same years Mary Hollow has been its executive director, but she doesn't pridefully tick them off when asked about her achievements during her tenure.

In fact, she's reluctant to take much credit at all for the impressive acquisitions. Instead, she speaks to her beloved staff, her board's leadership, an army of volunteers, and Prickly Pear becoming a "community institution." About as close as she comes to talking real estate is to describe the land trust's "expansion of our work into broader conservation work and efforts." Broader indeed.

**"Stay modest and attentive to what your community needs, what it wants of you in a way that will inspire growth and conservation value."**

So what did the board see in this outgoing 34-year-old when they were looking to fill the very capable shoes of her predecessor, Andy Baur? Jonathan Krauss and Jim Utterback, both former PPLT board presidents, were on the search committee. "We had great candidates," recalls Jonathan. "But with her energy, her heart for conservation..." Recalling how PPLT had "started in people's living rooms," he described the maturation of the land trust. "We were becoming an adolescent organization

and poised to take the next step. Mary has taken us there ... to the grown up land trust that we are."

Jim, too, recalls the impressive list of job finalists. "She rose to the top," he says, "buoyed by her leadership style and vision." Her moxie struck a chord. "She's on the job maybe seven or eight months and says 'I want to do this project and need to borrow \$3 million.' "Sensing his accountant roots, Jim may have gulped, knowing

her proposal was perhaps 10-fold of prior PPLT commitments. Today, Sevenmile and Tenmile Creek Park are among the most vital acquisitions in the legacy of the Land Trust.

"She has moved us from not just trails but to land conservation," says Jim. "We are a land trust. The conservation she's done is fabulous."

Jonathan agrees: "She's added the element of community conservation, exemplified by the Tenmile, Sevenmile and Prickly Pear Creek Greenway projects."

These projects didn't just fall together. They necessitated "bringing together aspects of a community that automatically might not work together," says Jonathan. "Not because they're opposed, they're just in their own bubble. We all are."

Mary readily articulates the virtues of community collaboration. "We strive to be inclusive," she says, noting in particular the partnership with the Montana Army National Guard which made possible the Tenmile project. That partnership earned PPLT and



the Guard the prestigious Army Community Partnership Award last year. The amenities of Tenmile are enjoyed by many. But the solace offered to veterans being treated for PTSD at the nearby Veterans Hospital comes as close as anything to engendering a tinge of pride for Mary.

And how is this Prickly Pear Land Trust culture of community continued? "We have to always strive for excellence," Mary says. "Stay modest and attentive to what your community needs, what it wants of you in a way that will inspire growth and conservation value."

HARVEST MOON HIATUS

2020 has been anything but normal, and the last six months have been some of the hardest months of our lives. PPLT has made difficult decisions and pivoted our work on a dime. We have had to do more with less and our dedicated staff and board continue to do everything they can to make sure that PPLT remains strong and land, water, and trail projects move forward during uncertain times.

With several major land acquisition, stream restoration, and trail projects culminating in their final stages, this summer is packed by normal standards. Summer is also when PPLT begins planning Harvest Moon. When we weighed the options and risks to host Harvest Moon this year, it

became clear that we would need to cancel the event. Harvest Moon annually raises in excess of \$300,000 for PPLT, making up forty percent of our annual budget. To say this event is critical to the success of PPLT is an understatement. *Without the gifts made at Harvest Moon, our work does not happen.*

So, in lieu of Harvest Moon this year, PPLT is coming to you with a personal request. You have witnessed the passion this community has for conservation and trails in this incredible corner of Montana. Giving back to this place is important to you. Will you make a gift to PPLT this summer?

Will you help us keep boots on the ground, and critical conservation and trails projects moving forward?

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AROUND THE VALLEY

Progress on the **Brooklyn Bridge** trail is temporarily on pause as the Forest Service works through details related to complications with the Tenmile-South Helena project. PPLT will pick up work on finalizing the trail corridor as soon as we're given the green light.  
PPLT will be commenting on the BLM's management plan for the **Scratchgravel Hills**. It includes 40 miles of proposed

new trails and the BLM is accepting comments until August 22.  
A shade structure has been erected at **Tenmile Creek Park**, thanks to contributions from Mountain Hardware and The BaseCamp. Some of the new trees there, once thought dead, are recovering. Late June rains caused flooding along the creekside trail. Focus will continue on eliminating weeds and a project to restore native grasses on five acres is planned for the fall.

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"THE (EDUCATION)  
SHOW GOES ON"