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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

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Jane Rau

Continued from Page A1

A longtime desert preservationist, Rau is considered a driving force behind an effort spawned more than a quarter-century ago that created what today is the Valley's largest protected desert municipal preserve.

In the early 1990s, after several years of lobbying the City Council against unchecked development, Rau helped create a grass-roots group to save Scottsdale's mountains and desert from sprawling development. The McDowell Sonoran Land Trust, now the Conservancy, was a tour de force that laid the foundation for Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve, the expanse of protected desert and mountains that now spans 47 square miles, larger than Tempe.

Today, more than 570 volunteers and several full-time employees work on the preserve, an unprecedented effort that has cost the city nearly \$950 million since its inception. Scottsdale voters have affirmed its importance by twice approving a sales tax dedicated exclusively to maintaining and expanding the preserve.

Annually, the preserve draws more than 350,000 visitors — a population bigger than most Arizona cities.

Friend and foe alike today agree: Jane Rau is a woman who made a difference, and it can be seen every day along the trails and unspoiled desert that is the preserve.

"It is impossible to describe Jane's commitment to making the McDowell Sonoran Preserve a reality as anything other than extraordinary," said Karen Bertiger, a Land Trust co-founder and Rau's friend.

Scottsdale has honored Rau's accomplishments by designating the new Jane Rau Trail at the Brown's Ranch Trailhead in north Scottsdale. The city plans to install interpretive signs along the path in March. A celebration also is planned.

'Someone had to step in'

Rau was an activist long before the Land Trust became a reality.

Her passion for the desert was apparent in an interview with *The Arizona Republic*, her bluish-gray eyes turning toward the saguaro spread across her Saguaro property in far north Scottsdale.

"How could one let them continue to destroy all of this?" Rau asked, occasionally glancing out at the desert and recalling how she began speaking out decades ago to protect the unspoiled land. "Someone had to step in and put the city on the right track."

Rau has lived on her rural property north of Dynamite Boulevard for close to 50 years. While sprawling estates and ranches have stayed around her, Rau's property has stayed relatively secluded, reachable only by a dirt road.

Rau, her curly gray hair in pigtails, peered at the mountain ranges to the south and east. The desert, mild even in January, was silent except for chiming wind bells.

"Look at all this panorama around me and the beauty of our mountains and of the desert," she said. "It was criminal when you could see the city allowing beautiful desert like this to be completely destroyed and made into an empty lot, so too much could be built."

Rau, who was born in Ohio in 1922, moved to Arizona 47 years ago with her husband, Leonard, who died in 1992.

The couple bought the property north of Dynamite Boulevard and surrounding desert in what was then unincorporated Maricopa County. They built their house in the style of a Navajo hogan.

Rau, who is always smiling and quick to give hugs, remembers hiking through the unfettered desert decades before urban sprawl crept into north Scottsdale.

She preaches that the desert is needed for restoration in a hectic world. "I remember all the hiking I did before there were people and houses and everything," Rau said. "People really don't look and understand what all is there. It's so special."

Indeed, Rau's legacy might be summed up in the phrase, "Don't take anything for granted."

She is in many ways a contradiction, friendly but fiercely independent, preferring the desert's solitude to the friction that comes with bureaucracy.

Voice of the desert

Prior to Scottsdale annexing her property in the 1980s, Rau was a member of a homeowners' group called CKANSI, or County Residents Against Scottsdale Incineration, who wanted to be left alone, far away from the booming growth that was encroaching into Scottsdale and other Arizona cities.

"They didn't want to become cityfied," Scottsdale community historian Joan Palada said. "They wanted to remain rural."

In many ways, Rau was a lone voice. Decades ago, she set out as a defender of the desert, a self-described "burr under Scottsdale's saddle," to remind city officials and developers that the natural environment is precious and finite. She battled many development projects and rezoning cases that she believed would ravish the fragile natural environment. This included golf courses, which she feared would deplete precious water supplies and ruin the natural state of the desert.

"I think Jane's concept of preservation was that nothing gets disturbed," said Tim Bray, president of Southwest Community Resources, whose company helped bring reclaimed water to north Scottsdale golf courses.

In 1987, Rau resisted plans for a multi-million-dollar movie studio on 40 acres near Scottsdale Road and Dynamite Boulevard, stressing that it would destroy

the rural lifestyle of the area.

"She spoke her mind," said Donald Prior, a Scottsdale councilman from 1994 to 1998. "She was straightforward so you knew where she stood. She was 100 percent for protecting our environment and wanting those things done by the city that would protect the environment."

Rau fought even if it meant opposing the city's top elected officials.

In 1988, after unsuccessfully running for Scottsdale City Council, Rau was the sole person to publicly oppose the annexation of 530 acres in the city's northeastern boundaries. A lone speaker at a public hearing, Rau said the annexation benefited a developer at the expense of residents.

But Scottsdale's then mayor, the late Herb Driskwater, who had built a reputation for getting along with those he disagreed with, said the annexation was a good plan because it would bring more revenue to the city.

As often happened, they agreed to disagree.

Rau was very cautious about development and any encroachment into the desert," said Lou Jekel, a retired zoning attorney in Scottsdale. "When she would get up at the podium, she could lay it out pretty thick and certainly was not a shrinking violet."

Pressure to preserve land

By the late 1980s, it was apparent the McDowell Mountains, rich in natural beauty and wildlife, were under threat. Like Phoenix's South Mountain Park and the Phoenix Mountains Preserve, Scottsdale was facing increasing pressures from developers to build on the mountains, generally bounded by Shea Boulevard to the north and Fountain Hills to the east. At the time, it was estimated that as much as three-quarters of the mountain land was privately owned and zoned for development.

But up to that point, saving the peaks had been all talk and no action.

The issue took on even greater urgency when, in 1986, the Arizona Supreme Court ruled as unconstitutional the city's Hillside Ordinance, which regulated where in the McDowell Mountains foothills development could occur. The city later created an Environmentally Sensitive Land Ordinance in 1991 as a way to still guide development in the foothills and surrounding desert.

The McDowell Sonoran Land Trust also formed in 1991, bringing greater attention to the preservation of the mountains boasting landmarks such as East End, the highest peak, and the butte known as Ron's Thumb.

Bertiger, in a written memoir about the Land Trust, recalled that members "had a desire to get more citizens thinking about what they wanted the future of the community to look like, and what would happen to all of the wild beautiful open spaces in the northern part of the city."

Early on, Rau was "a tireless fundraiser as well as promoter," said Pete Chassar, who led the Land Trust's original executive committee. "She held dinners and potlucks, often at her own home, the Hogans, to bring donors in."

Scottsdale voters respond

Mike Millilo, a former project coordinator for Scottsdale, said he befriended Rau during a period of rapid growth in Scottsdale. They had a mutual concern to protect the McDowell and surrounding Sonoran desert.

"Jane, Pete (Chassar) and myself had our unique perspectives, but reached the same conclusion regarding desert preservation," Millilo said. "It would take a concerted effort to build support among political leaders, property owners and the general public, and it would require a dedicated funding source to no longer open space together with open-space dedication from developers."

By 1994, the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission began studying how to raise the millions of dollars needed to purchase areas of the mountain range. Estimates to buy the entire mountain area at that time ran as high as \$100 million, according to past *Republic* news reports.

A year later, their efforts finally were rewarded.

In one of the biggest elections in Scottsdale history, city voters passed a landmark sales-tax increase in 1995 to raise money for the preservation of the mountains. The unprecedented vote was followed by another tax increase, passed in 2004, to raise revenue for preserve land as well as amenities such as trails, heads.



Scottsdale resident Jane Rau, 91, has fought many development projects she said encroached on the desert's beauty. MARK HENRIKSEN/PHOTO

In the mid-1990s, Scottsdale started buying up land within the recommended preserve boundaries.

Other preserve activists included Chester "Chet" Andrews, who was chairman of the board of the McDowell Sonoran Land Trust, and Carla, a former Land Trust executive director who goes by one name.

"We went through a war together," Carla said. "And Jane was always there to act as one of the public faces who could speak eloquently about the need for the land for the people."

Carla stressed that the preserve would not exist if not for the hard work of eight to 10 people. "What Jane brought was tenacity," Carla said. She said Rau was the "spirit" of the group, a relentless force able to sway people with her baking abilities.

"It's really hard to get mad at Jane because she will bake you zucchini cupcakes," Carla said.

Rau, however, is quick to give credit to the dozens of other activists, city officials and residents who pushed to save the desert, calling the attention "unbelievable."

A legacy along a trail

Rau now is a lifetime charter director of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, which works alongside the city to protect and maintain the urban preserve, one of the largest in the country.

Since the 1990s, Scottsdale has spent about \$946 million on the preserve, including bonds that the city must repay, said Kroy Eldbow, Scottsdale's preserve director.

In recent years, Scottsdale has focused on buying tracts of land north of the McDowell Mountains, including desert reaching as far north as the Tonto National Forest.

In October, the Jane Rau Interpretive Trail opened at one of the preserve's newest jewels, the Brown's Ranch Trailhead. The trail, roughly a half-mile long, will include interpretive signage this spring. It complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Rau, who will turn 92 in July, said she typically visits the Brown's Ranch Trailhead once a week with her dog, Pippi, who is the conservancy's smallest volunteer. They patrol the desert and clean up waste along the trails.

"I live with all of this beauty every single day," Rau said. "I spend all of my time wandering and learning."

In 2004, Rau was inducted into the Scottsdale History Hall of Fame.

She was recognized in 2011 by the Cultural Landscape Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based group, for her help in preserving thousands of acres of Sonoran desert.

Rau "has obviously done great things for the city and been passionate, especially for the preserve and the Western lifestyle," Scottsdale City Councilman Dennis Robb said.

In addition to her work with the Conservancy, Rau has been passionate and provider of flowers for homebound or hospitalized members of Desert Hills Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale.

"There's so much one can do and so many interesting things in the world," Rau said. "Why do the same thing every day?"

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