A little walking goes a long way: from neighborhood jaunts to work on Bay Area Ridge, SF Crosstown trails and Walk San Francisco

Description

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When Karen Rhodes retired from a career in communications in 2017, she began walking to get to know San Francisco. She walked for exercise. She walked as meditation, to gather her thoughts.

While walking, she noticed the many stairways that made it easier to navigate her hilly Bernal Heights neighborhood.

Karen Rhodesâ?? retirement sent her off, literally, on a new path. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

Rhodes made a game of discovering where the stairways were and mapping out different routes that would encompass several of them. â??I was excited to learn there are over 50 public stairways in Bernal Heights,â?• she said.

Even with that many stairways, Rhodes still noticed hillsides that could use one. Through a connection in the SF Parks Alliance, she met a group already in the process of creating the Tompkins Stairway Garden, situated above the Alemany Farmersâ?? Market.

â??An architect and landscape designer had donated their services, but they needed money to put the plans into effect,â?• she said, â??and fundraising was one of my fields of expertise.â?• Rhodes wrote two grants, and the stairway garden became another community stewardship success story.

AIDS fundraising

Rhodes has fundraised for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and now Walk San Francisco. After moving to San Francisco in 1988 with her future husband, Robert Weiner, Rhodes volunteered for the Shanti Project and participated â?? in 1998, 1999 and 2015 â?? in the AIDS Foundationâ??s 550-mile, multi-day ride between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Always athletic, she had previously trained for 100-mile rides, known as century rides, which can last up to seven hours.

Her love of hiking and walking led her to join those developing The Bay Area Ridge Trail, help launch the 17-mile SF Crosstown Trail and design and lead urban walking tours for Walk San Francisco. She is now president of its board, organizing walks to raise $5,000 to $7,000 for the nonprofit each year.

Rhodes, above, hikes a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail in the Marin Headlands. Her goal is to hike the entire 400-miles trail. Below, she Janet McBride tackle the Caleras Creek Trail in Milpitas. (Photos courtesy of Karen Rhodes)

Rhodes eventually extended her exploratory walks past Bernal Heights. She walked over Twin Peaks up to Mt. Davidson, over to â??hidden gemsâ?• like McLaren Park and the Visitation Valley Greenway, where she kept encountering the same cohort of like-minded walkers. â??I met Bob Siegel, a trail-building activist who first got me involved with the group working on the Bay Area Ridge Trail in 2017, and later with the Crosstown Trail,â?• she said.

A 400-mile goal

Now, sheâ??s a circumnavigator of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, someone who sets a goal of hiking the whole trail to win bragging rights. â??Iâ??ve been at it several years and, so far, Iâ??ve hiked 250

miles in segments,â?• she said. The trail, whose first segment was completed in 1989, is now a 400-mile network connecting the entire Bay Area, from Calistoga to Morgan Hill, including a segment through San Francisco.

In 2019, Siegel tapped Rhodes to help launch the 17-mile SF Crosstown Trail. She tested the route to refine the mapping, making sure the directions were easy to follow. Drawing on her communications work at both the University of California-Santa Cruz and UC-Berkeley, Rhodes helped launch the trailâ??s website and social media presence and alerted other walking organizations to its existence. â??Itâ??s really gratifying to see how popular the trail has become,â?• she said.

That same year, she began designing and leading urban walking tours for Walk San Francisco, a pedestrian advocacy nonprofit. Its mission is to make city San Franciscoâ??s streets safe and accessible for everyone, whether walking, biking or using public transportation.

Rhodes, whose last position was executive director of Marketing and Communications in UC-Berkeleyâ??s College of Engineering, got her start in communications as a student at UC-Santa Cruz, working for the college radio station, KZSC. She started as a music programmer, a DJ, but switched to news reader when the station started covering local news. â??I found I was very talkative behind a microphone,â?• she said.

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The Bay Ridge Trail on San Franciscoâ??s Mt. Davidson overlooks the Sutro Tower. (Photo courtesy of Karen Rhodes)

There was much to cover in the â??70s when Rhodes attended college. Political engagement was high on campus around feminism, gay rights, environmentalism and more.

That environment influenced the creation of her own major, European Intellectual History. â??I was interested in how ideas change through cultures over time. I wanted to know how we go about defining our experience in the world and making sense of it.â?•

Writing for the weeklies

After graduating in 1977, she cobbled together low-paying jobs writing for alternative weeklies.

Desiring a steady paycheck, she decided to join the â??establishmentâ?• and was hired as a public affairs officer by her college alma mater. She was responsible for intra-campus communications and representing the college to the media.

She likes to tell the story of wanting to find a job at UC-Berkeley after moving to San Francisco and being amazed to find the perfect job there when she opened the classifieds: writing about fundraising developments.

After 12 years in the central development office securing major gifts for the university, a job opened in the College of Engineering. She jumped at the opportunity, and later put in a bid for the director of marketing spot. â??My dad was an aerospace engineer in southern California,â?• she said, â??and I decided I wanted to work with people like my dad who are problem-solvers and solution-oriented.â?•

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Rhodes and her husband, Robert Weiner.

She also credits her dad with her love of the outdoors and hiking. With their home at the base of the San Gabriel Mountain foothills, he led her and her three younger siblings on hikes and backpacking trips. â??He told us we could explore private property as long as we werenâ??t detected.â?•

Rhodes continued to do major gifts work in the College of Engineering, but communications was her passion. When the executive director of marketing and communications spot became available â?? a job that would include writing speeches for the dean â?? she made a pitch for it, and got it.

Now 68, being very busy is Rhodesâ?? comfort zone. â??I do enjoy cooking and reading, but Sunday mornings is when I really relax doing my crossword puzzle.â?•

Her husband is much better at leisure, she said. He doesnâ??t join her on her longer hikes, but they do enjoy strolling city neighborhoods together. â??We share a love of visiting cities such as Montreal, Chicago and New Orleans and exploring them on foot.â?•

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