

**Mill Valley Oral History Program**

*A collaboration between the Mill Valley  
Historical Society and the Mill Valley  
Public Library*

**Susan Reynolds**

**An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Nancy Emerson in 2018**

TITLE: Oral History of Susan Reynolds  
INTERVIEWER: Nancy Emerson  
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 21 pages  
INTERVIEW DATE: November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018

In this oral history, retired teacher and gardening enthusiast Susan Reynolds recounts her life in Mill Valley. Born in Richmond in 1940, Susan grew up in Kensington and attended school in El Cerrito. Susan describes how she and her family would often come over to Marin for hiking and picnics on Mt. Tam when she was growing up. Susan attended San Jose State University, where she developed her child-centered approach to teaching. In 1964, Susan and her husband moved to Mill Valley and she began her teaching career in the Mill Valley School District. Beginning at Homestead School, Susan went on to teach at Park School, Old Mill School, Strawberry Point School, and finally Edna Maguire School, from which she retired in 1997. It was at Edna Maguire where Susan developed the Mill Valley Children's Garden, a major part of her legacy to the community. After retirement, Susan became a very active member of the Outdoor Art Club. She discusses her travels, her hobbies, and her family, and concludes her oral history reminiscing fondly about old Mill Valley.

© All materials copyright Mill Valley Public Library. Transcript made available for research purposes only. All rights are reserved to the Mill Valley Library. Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the:

Lucretia Little History Room  
Mill Valley Public Library  
375 Throckmorton Avenue  
Mill Valley, CA 94941

## Oral History of Susan Reynolds

### Index

Bass, Stevie...p.9, 11  
Boyle Park...p.18  
Children's Garden...p.6-14  
County Golden Bell award...p.11  
Edna Maguire School...p.6  
Family...p.17  
Flynn, Jill Allyce Nickerson  
    (daughter)...p.4, 18, 20  
Frazier, Craig...p.13  
Frazier, Suzanne...p.9  
Growing Enterprises of Marin...p.6  
Herrmann, Christie...p.10  
Homestead School...p.3  
Johnson, Wendy and Peter...7-8  
Lescohier, Bill...p.9  
McDonough, Patrick...p.8  
Nickerson, Kurt Robert (son)...p.4, 20  
Old Mill School...p.4  
Outdoor Art Club...p.15, 19  
Park School...p.4  
Patrick, Mike...p.6  
Recreation center...p.18  
Richmond Cottage Hospital...p.1  
Rojas, John...p.9  
San Jose State University...p.2  
Schooling...p.1  
Smith and Hawken...p.6  
Steuerwald, Alice Irene (mother)...p.1  
Steuerwald, Frederick Louis  
    (brother)...p.2  
Steuerwald, Louis Daniel (father)...p.2  
Steuerwald, Paul Konrad (brother)...p.2  
Strawberry Point School...p.4  
Tamalpais High School...p.20  
Travels...p.16-17  
University of California, Berkeley...p.2

**Oral History of Susan Reynolds**  
**November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Editor's note:** This transcript has been reviewed by Susan Reynolds, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

**0:00:00 Nancy Emerson:** This is Nancy Emerson on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library's Oral History Program. I'm here in the Mill Valley Library's recording studio on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 with Susan Reynolds, a Mill Valley resident and a long-time educator with a twist. Susan's particular claim to fame is her role with the Edna Maguire School Children's Garden. Susan, I'm so glad we can add your oral history to our collection. Are you ready to begin?

**0:00:29 Susan Reynolds:** I certainly am.

**0:00:30 Nancy Emerson:** Good. Let's start with where and when you were born. What was your birth name?

**0:00:36 Susan Reynolds:** Okay. I was born at Richmond Cottage Hospital and actually lived in the Kensington area of the Berkeley Hills. My birth name was Susan Jane Steuerwald. I was born October 25, 1940.

**0:00:55 Nancy Emerson:** Great. And Richmond Cottage Hospital was located in —

**0:01:00 Susan Reynolds:** It was close to the Standard Oil Refinery, I think. My father was a chemical engineer with Standard Oil.

**0:01:07 Nancy Emerson:** In Richmond, California?

**0:01:09 Susan Reynolds:** Richmond, California. Yes.

**0:01:10 Nancy Emerson:** Alright. Will you talk about your early days, who your parents were? You've told us about your father some, but also where you lived and where you went to school.

**0:01:19 Susan Reynolds:** We lived in Kensington. My father was a chemical engineer with Standard Oil. My mother was a hospital dietician. I attended the schools in El Cerrito: Harding Elementary, Portola Junior High, and El Cerrito High School. And actually, I have lived here in Mill Valley for 55 years and taught in the Mill Valley School District for over 30.

**0:01:50 Nancy Emerson:** Great. Let's see, I don't think I heard your mother's name.

**0:01:54 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, I'm sorry. She was Alice Irene Steuerwald.

**0:01:57 Nancy Emerson:** Great. And did you have siblings?

**0:02:00 Susan Reynolds:** Yes. I have two brothers, Frederick Louis and Paul Konrad Steuerwald, and my father was Louis Daniel Steuerwald. My mother was Alice Irene.

**0:02:14 Nancy Emerson:** Great. Okay. And university, where did you go to university?

**0:02:20 Susan Reynolds:** I attended San Jose State University where the focus was on child-centered, activity-based learning, which actually became the theme of my teaching career in Mill Valley, in the Mill Valley School District, as well as my summers in the '80s when I was teaching at UC Berkeley. I taught curriculum development for Tolman Hall School of Education, which included a very important interdisciplinary approach of integrating subjects, a kind of hands-on approach to learning, and the Tribes Affective Domain curriculum.

**0:03:02 Nancy Emerson:** The Tolman school, was that within Berkeley?

**0:03:06 Susan Reynolds:** That's the School of Education within UC Berkeley.

**0:03:09 Nancy Emerson:** Okay.

**0:03:10 Susan Reynolds:** I had a supervisor from Dominican University who then transferred to Berkeley, and I was invited to teach in her UC Berkeley program in the summers.

**0:03:28 Nancy Emerson:** That's wonderful.

**0:03:29 Susan Reynolds:** It was an exciting program.

**0:03:30 Nancy Emerson:** That's great. So, you started your teaching career not in Mill Valley, is that right?

**0:03:37 Susan Reynolds:** No, I didn't. Actually, after I graduated from San Jose, I did teach one year in Silicon Valley, and after that year, I married in El Cerrito and we moved to Mill Valley. My husband said to me, "Where would you like to live?" We were fortunate to have that option. And because, as a child, my family had come to Marin County to go hiking and picnicking over the years, and we had many family friends here, this is where I wanted to live. I had so many wonderful childhood memories of hiking in Mill Valley and on Mt. Tam.

**0:04:21 Nancy Emerson:** So you would have moved to Mill Valley in the '70s?

**0:04:26 Susan Reynolds:** I moved to Mill Valley in 1963.

**0:04:28 Nancy Emerson:** '63, okay.

**0:04:32 Susan Reynolds:** We were married in June of 1963, and we moved to Mill Valley and we built our home and moved in in April of '64.

**0:04:51 Nancy Emerson:** Wow.

**0:04:53 Susan Reynolds:** And actually, I live in that house still today. I'm apparently not a mover [chuckles], a mover in that respect. I was hired by the Mill Valley School District in January 1964 to teach a first grade class at Homestead School, and I was young and enthusiastic and apparently I could do no wrong. So essentially, when the principal Betty Grimm observed my teaching math in Spanish, I was a keeper. Anyway, I was hired in January of '64 by Jim Palmer Collins, who was the superintendent at that time. Can I tell you a little bit about Homestead School?

**0:05:47 Nancy Emerson:** Definitely.

**0:05:49 Susan Reynolds:** Homestead School in those days — in the little valley of Homestead — had a hotdog room next to my classroom, and it seemed the hub of parent activity. And it seemed to me there were more horses on the street, being ridden on the street, and dogs on the playground than there were children attending the school. It was just a delightful atmosphere and it was a wonderful way to start in Mill Valley.

**0:06:22 Nancy Emerson:** Wow. Do you have a sense of what the school population was at that time?

**0:06:26 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, you mean of the entire district?

**0:06:29 Nancy Emerson:** No, of Homestead School.

**0:06:29 Susan Reynolds:** Homestead was a tiny school. I think it was probably one class at each grade level. There were probably six teachers all together, and they were veterans — I mean, these ladies had been there forever. So I was kind of this new young thing, and it was a kick.

**0:06:56 Nancy Emerson:** You were probably learning from each other.

**0:07:00 Susan Reynolds:** We were.

**0:07:00 Nancy Emerson:** The older teachers from you and you from them.

**0:07:01 Susan Reynolds:** Mm-hmm. Well, it was Margaret Ulney and Florentine Chase and Mrs. Julia Dempster and Mrs. Lewis. These were classic teachers that had been teaching for 40 years already. [chuckles] But, as far as the location, it was a small school with just the residential area all around it and a very active supportive parent community.

**0:07:32 Nancy Emerson:** What a great start.

**0:07:33 Susan Reynolds:** It was.

**0:07:34 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah. But then you moved on to a different school.

**0:07:36 Susan Reynolds:** Well actually, I retired. I took early retirement after two years. I thought that that's what I was doing. I taught at Homestead until the birth of my son Kurt Robert Nickerson in 1965 and then my daughter, Jill Allyce Nickerson in 1967. I was a stay-at-home mom for about five years. I was canvassing neighborhoods for the Mill Valley Middle School bond election, I participated in AAUW groups, I was president of the Tamalpais Sunny Hills Guild and an active member of the Mill Valley Tennis Club.

**0:08:31 Nancy Emerson:** Whoa. [chuckles]

**0:08:33 Susan Reynolds:** We had a busy life, and I returned to teaching kindergarten at Park School in 1970. The next year, after teaching there one year, I transferred to Old Mill School because I had a number of friends that taught there, and I ended up teaching at Old Mill School during the '70s, at Strawberry Point School during the '80s, and Edna Maguire School during the '90s, until I retired in '97.

**0:09:14 Nancy Emerson:** Great. So, back to Old Mill School, were you also teaching kindergarten there?

**0:09:18 Susan Reynolds:** At Old Mill, I taught first and second. At Strawberry Point, I taught, first, second, and then transient — first, second and third, fourth and fifth. I taught several combined classes.

**0:09:33 Nancy Emerson:** What's a combined class?

**0:09:35 Susan Reynolds:** Well, combined classes are two grade levels. I enjoyed that because I found the different ranges within the class intriguing. I taught a two-three combination, and one year I taught a four-five combination, so I did have some students a number of times in repeated fashion, but it didn't seem to disturb the parents. [chuckles] It really worked well.

**0:10:04 Nancy Emerson:** It sounds like you taught all grade levels in the elementary school range.

**0:10:08 Susan Reynolds:** Yes.

**0:10:09 Nancy Emerson:** And did you have a favorite?

**0:10:12 Susan Reynolds:** Well, I loved third grade. I always had adored first grade. In first grade you teach social skills and management, and then second grade you add on the

academic. But third grade, we just did all kinds of wonderful things. The kids could write plays, and put on plays. I guess I would say third grade was probably my favorite.

**0:10:43 Nancy Emerson:** There's another aspect of third grade that I think you really owned. Well, maybe two aspects. I'm thinking of the Mill Valley history that gets embedded in the curriculum for third graders.

**0:11:01 Susan Reynolds:** Exactly. Mill Valley history is third grade territory. We really devised all kinds of — "Let's get out and see Mill Valley. Let's visit the Outdoor Art Club. Let's visit the library, the History Room." We went to the older buildings in Mill Valley and sketched them. Children wrote plays about the early settlement in Mill Valley. It was wonderful fun. I'm only sorry that we didn't go to the Mill Valley Library's history walk, or the Historical Society's walks. I've done that since I retired. I thought I knew, but I have a lot to learn.

**0:11:51 Nancy Emerson:** There's plenty of history to last us our lifetimes, I think.

**0:11:54 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, absolutely.

**0:11:56 Nancy Emerson:** Now, the other aspect of teaching that maybe it's time for us to get into is your interest in hands-on learning and integrative learning, and that with the famous garden.

**0:12:10 Susan Reynolds:** I think so.

**0:12:12 Nancy Emerson:** Are you ready to talk about that?

**0:12:12 Susan Reynolds:** I am, with just one little backup, which I discovered while I was taking a look at my own personal biography. I realized in growing up that I used to round the children up in my neighborhood, and come up with garden activities — catching polliwogs, or garden activities at home. I love being with children, and I liked all the areas of the curriculum, but the garden is definitely memorable. To me, it's one of the most memorable experiences in my life.

**0:13:00 Nancy Emerson:** And it is part of your fame, I think, your local fame.

**0:13:02 Susan Reynolds:** Oh dear.

**0:13:03 Nancy Emerson:** Right? [laughs]

**0:13:03 Susan Reynolds:** Maybe, I'm not sure about that, but I certainly was known in the school.

**0:13:09 Nancy Emerson:** And in the community.



**0:13:09 Susan Reynolds:** And I guess on television, when you come to think about it. The videotape done by one of the master gardeners was on television a lot. So, you'd walk into the grocery store and there'd be, "Oh, you're the garden lady." Anyway, the Mill Valley Children's Garden, from the beginning, I'd love to —

**0:13:31 Nancy Emerson:** Please tell us how it got started.

**0:13:33 Susan Reynolds:** Okay, well Edna Maguire School was closed and rented out, and the teachers were over at Strawberry Point. On the Edna Maguire site there was a third of an acre garden that was established in combination with several, I want to say, organizations. Growing Enterprises of Marin was an organization that worked with developmentally challenged adults to help teach them marketable skills. So the board of directors for that had a Green Gulch connection with Yvonne Rand, Wendy Johnson and her husband Peter Rednick, and then with the horticulture store or the garden store downtown, Smith and Hawken. They needed a test garden for the tulips that they had collected from around the world. So, as you can see, we had multiple surprises that happened, and we didn't know what was coming up out of the ground. Anyway, so while Edna Maguire was rented out, this garden was developed. And when it came time, the faculty at Strawberry had a staff meeting to prepare, really, for moving back and transitioning back to the Edna Maguire site.

**0:15:26 Nancy Emerson:** And why was it that it was going to become a school once again?

**0:15:31 Susan Reynolds:** Well, there was a great school population increase, so they needed more room, and this was wonderful for the district. They were needing to re-open the school, and it was over 400 children in that school so it was significantly larger than Strawberry.

**0:15:53 Nancy Emerson:** This has been running up to the 1990s.

**0:15:56 Susan Reynolds:** Yes, this was in the spring of 1990. And what happened at the faculty meeting was kind of interesting in that Mike Patrick, our school business manager, proposed black topping over the garden because he felt that the teachers already had their plates full, that they were already very, very busy and they didn't need to deal with a garden.

**0:16:25:** Many of the faculty members, actually, were absent the day that he did this presentation, but there was a reaction to Mike's proposal, and basically teachers were saying, "Well, what do you mean? We're going to miss an outstanding hands-on learning lab for the children in this city." And, well, the staff questioned the district's thinking on this, and there was a very lively discussion, as you can imagine. Well, I was just a bit outspoken, I'm afraid. So what happened at the next faculty meeting, it was attended by everyone, and by the full staff who was well aware of the situation and the possibilities. I said nothing, and everyone else on the staff spoke up. I was thrilled. I couldn't believe it. Everyone was really on board on the topic.

**0:17:34 Nancy Emerson:** Excuse me for interrupting, but had you lobbied before this next faculty meeting to get people to speak up?

**0:17:40 Susan Reynolds:** I possibly did that. [chuckles] I chatted with all of the faculty and told them what had been proposed and asked them what did they think about the possibilities and would they be interested in a buy-in. And it was very positive, so truly I didn't have to say a thing. I was very concerned that I was going to make a fool of myself and I didn't have to.

**0:18:08 Nancy Emerson:** And how did the school administration react to this uprising?

**0:18:13 Susan Reynolds:** Well, we met with a superintendent and the business manager and they suggested that we have a study group to talk about what options there were and how that would look. Basically, the district decided that they would not help us with this project, so we were given one CCF [centum cubic feet] of water in one year, and the rest is really history. I think that they wondered whether this would happen.

**0:18:51 Nancy Emerson:** So it sounds like you had this meeting, and studied the options, and they begrudgingly agreed to give you a chance.

**0:19:00 Susan Reynolds:** We were in full force. [chuckles]

**0:19:02 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah.

**0:19:03 Susan Reynolds:** It was sort of, "Well, we can't be involved in it. We don't have the money for it." It's still basically the way it is pretty much today, but there are different sources and people ask for grants. There has been different funding and help that has come forward. And I will say that the district maintenance guy Don was just at our side. We had a third of an acre, one shed for tools, and one spigot for water. Well, that didn't work too well, or just didn't have much in the way of possibilities. So Don installed maybe a dozen spigots for us, and helped us set up different areas within the garden. We moved from Strawberry Point to Edna Maguire campus in the fall of 1990. And what was wonderful was that Wendy Johnson and her husband Peter proposed that we plant a good portion of the garden in pumpkins, so that when we arrived in the fall there would be pumpkins for all of the children. The staff went over in the spring and planted pumpkins, and we worked on watering them and maintaining them throughout the summer. So that was our arrival gift to the school.<sup>1</sup>

**0:20:48 Nancy Emerson:** That's beautiful.

**0:20:49 Susan Reynolds:** Yes, it was really memorable.

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith and Hawken donated \$1,000 worth of wooden English garden tools to the Mill Valley Children's Garden — a very much needed and appreciated gift! —Susan Reynolds.

**0:20:51 Nancy Emerson:** Now who are Wendy Johnson and her husband? Were they parents?

**0:20:55 Susan Reynolds:** Well, I did have their child Jessie, who's a firefighter here in Marin County now. But they were parents. They were also on the staff at Green Gulch Farm, and they are horticulturists at the Dragon's Gate. She's written some rather wonderful horticultural books. They were very, very supportive in helping us with the transition to Edna Maguire.

**0:21:26 Nancy Emerson:** So you knew in the spring that you were going to get this opportunity and you'd have to make a go of it, and so you worked on the garden over the summer, and then I'm thinking in the fall you had to develop a plan for how you were going to use this garden. How did that come about?

**0:21:49 Susan Reynolds:** Well, that came about, Nancy, in the form of a mentor grant that I received from the district. I made a proposal to the district that satisfied some aspect of the administration. I proposed putting together a handbook. It was an interesting experience — as technology was just getting underway in the classroom at that point — but we put together a garden handbook, a binder for every teacher, which gave them lots of background information, answered questions that they would need to have. It was kind of an ongoing diary or notebook as to the progress of what happened with their classroom in the garden, with their garden space or how they changed it, with reactions and photographs. So the binder and book was one aspect of the mentor grant.

**0:22:52:** The second aspect was proposed by our then superintendent of schools, Patrick McDonough. Patrick really saw the potential in the garden. I had several long conversations with him and he said, "It is so important. This is such a gem. This is such a beautiful situation." But he said, "You can't keep it to yourselves." He said, "It's so important for you to come up with a plan on how to share this with the entire public school population in Mill Valley." And, in that respect, he subsidized having substitutes come in from around the district and take over for the Edna Maguire teachers who worked in the garden. For two weeks in the fall and two weeks in the spring we conducted field trips to our garden. Teachers in the district signed up for an hour and a half to bring their children over to Edna Maguire and we gave them a whole orientation to the garden. We had the kids dig, we had the kids plant, we had the kids harvest, we had the kids work with the worm farm, and we had them build huge compost piles in which we cooked eggs.

**0:24:21 Nancy Emerson:** Wow.

**0:24:22 Susan Reynolds:** So it was something that went on until I retired, but apparently it is no longer. I think it needs re-introducing as a way of sharing — although other schools do have small gardens.

**0:24:40 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah, I wondered if that inspired gardens at the other elementary schools.

**0:24:44 Susan Reynolds:** I think it did, it really did. I know that Old Mill was wanting to have a garden, but couldn't because there's a capped sulfur spring there. I believe Tam Valley, Strawberry Point, and Park School have gardens. And apparently the one at Strawberry Point is quite nice. I haven't seen them recently. But I think it did [inspire other schools]. A class might come once a year, twice a year, and they did this for a number of years. So it was really a nice way to share and to inspire people.

**0:25:33 Nancy Emerson:** Just backing up a bit: The first year you were proving yourselves to the superintendent, but then something happened, I gather, that you actually got his support, and other district's support, so that you could integrate it, or no?

**0:25:55 Susan Reynolds:** Not overly. What happened, in addition to the mentor grant, was that we planned out an administrative process for the garden and we called it GAB, G-A-B. [chuckles] I quite liked that. We had the Garden Advisory Board, which were faculty and parents, and we had a steering committee that met monthly. I was the founding director, and I had a co-director that was a parent, Stevie Bass, who was actually a recipe designer for *Sunset Magazine*, and who had wonderful PR connections and was a real hands-on person in the garden. And then we had Suzanne Frazier. After Stevie left, Suzanne became the co-director and she was very active. And after me as faculty member, Bill Lescohier and John Rojas were directors. We met monthly, and then we also had four really active faculty meetings four times a year. We also had Life Lab, which is a science curriculum out of Santa Cruz. Before school would start each year we'd work with the teachers on the science curriculum, so that was wonderful.

**0:28:05:** So we did have an organized group combined of teachers and parents, and we were fortunate because we just had an unbelievably interested and involved parent community. It could not have been more wonderful. We all really worked hard. I taught full-time, and then I was out in the garden until 6:00 o'clock at night, and a number of teachers were also. The teachers at that time, with parent help, were taking the children out on a regular basis during the week. I don't know how that happens nowadays, because it is really a much larger school, but we were fortunate size-wise. There were 400 children, I think, in the school. We had such an unbelievably active group that really bought into the garden and had a lot of enthusiasm and energy. We were very fortunate.

**0:29:10 Nancy Emerson:** Maybe it was more than fortunate. Maybe it was hard work too. [laughs]

**0:29:14 Susan Reynolds:** Well, it was indeed; I mean, it was organizing and managing a lot. We would have assemblies in the garden, or small groups would go out and practice recorder. Kids would go out in small groups and draw and write poetry, writing in their journals — just so many ways they go out there. We would have garden PE. We would go out and do our stretches and our aerobic exercise. [chuckles] So it was just that the faculty could see endless possibilities and the parents just really enjoyed this.

**0:29:57 Nancy Emerson:** I would think that in the '90s, the early '90s, this was a distinguishing factor for that school. The parents might choose that school over the others because of the garden.

**0:30:08 Susan Reynolds:** They did, and Edna Maguire was an internationally diverse school. The garden was really a draw. In fact, I met someone last week whose relatives go there, and he was like — you know there is this identity, a really, really wonderful identity with the school. I had the mentor project in Life Lab, which were wonderful. The curriculum across the board, across subjects, made it very rich. And then also size-wise it could happen. There were great groups that would go in the garden. We had assemblies and concerts, sales of produce and flowers, and crafts fairs, which they still have. So it was just unlimited, and it was something that the teachers could see.

**0:31:43:** And another thing that we realized was that the children who didn't necessarily excel in the classroom, and who marched to a different drummer, the garden became a very wonderful place for them to shine. Their parents would show up and the children would be so proud that their parents were there. For them it really was positive.

**0:32:22 Nancy Emerson:** It must have been hard to leave in 1997. This garden idea had blossomed and was bearing fruit.

**0:32:33 Susan Reynolds:** Well, you know what Pat McDonough said to me, he said, "Susan, this will only be a success if you let it be passed on, if you stand back." Because it was a bit of a challenge with teaching full-time, and I was raising a grandson who was with me for eight years. But what he said was, "Put the pieces in place that will carry the garden on." That's what we would hope for. When my colleagues who left eight and 10 or 12 years later, it was still going. And there was very, very dedicated parent leadership. Lou Bodish was very involved in the '80s. I'm sorry, in the 2000s. And Ronnie Sharp was another of the parents who the second their kids went into kindergarten were involved ongoing. Since there's the new school, they've hired science teachers to be in the garden.

**0:34:05 Nancy Emerson:** Okay.

**0:34:05 Susan Reynolds:** They had a full-time garden teacher for about four years. She's currently on maternity leave with her first child. But there are educators who are now working in the garden who are credentialed, and they share a contract. I met them the other day, and it was interesting to see how they're carrying on. It's different. Christie Herrmann, my colleague who I've known forever since our old Mill days together, she said to me that founding a garden is different than inheriting one. There is a legacy. It's theirs. And there's a gut-level dedication. And in my conversations with her recently, talking about our wonderful garden, that initial staff really bought into it. They were dedicated, and their enthusiasm spilled over to the parent community and the neighborhood. Neighbors would come in saying, "Oh, we have some dahlia trees for you." I think Thelma Cornish, one of the elderly neighbors of the school who'd lived there forever on Shell Road, would come with surprises from their garden. "Oh, please

think about putting this in the main gate of the garden.” Or, “This is for the children to plant wherever they want.” There was a lot of identity, just within the neighborhood.

**0:35:48 Nancy Emerson:** Well, now taking that to maybe the other extreme, the garden was an award winner, and you were an award winner, right? There were some honors that you received.

**0:36:00 Susan Reynolds:** Yes. There were some areas that we received some recognition. Let me see. There was the County Golden Bell, and that’s an award given by the county. I was hoping to get the exact wording of what it is they were rewarding or awarding, but it was for outstanding achievement at a school. And there was a committee from the county that came and scrutinized our garden and looked at it carefully, interviewed me and also talked with all the staff. They really got a sense that there was dedication, that there was a really strong ethic here going for this outdoor learning center, and so we received a bell, a beautiful bell. But we have to find it. We are looking. That’s my search.

**0:36:56 Nancy Emerson:** Oh good.

**0:36:56 Susan Reynolds:** My current search is —

**0:36:57 Nancy Emerson:** Maybe it got lost in the rebuilding.

**0:37:00 Susan Reynolds:** Yeah. We have to locate that. But we received a beautiful bronze bell, and there was a lovely dedication dinner given by the county, and they wanted to know how the garden started. So, of course, they found out from the story. And then in 1993, Stevie Bass, my co-director, had many connections with publishers. She called *Better Homes and Gardens* and she said, “We’d like you to come and see our garden.” And so they sent a photographer and a writer out, and they photographed our garden, and it appeared in the *Better Homes and Gardens*. And what I thought was quite interesting was that though we had so many natural things in the garden they brought little plastic plants for the children to stand and hold. I’m thinking, “Oh my goodness, they don’t get it.” I should have said — now, as a retired teacher, I’d say — “Hey folks, come on, stand back a minute. Now, just take a look at what we have here.”

**0:38:09 Nancy Emerson:** Right.

**0:38:09 Susan Reynolds:** “And the kids will lead you on to just beautiful — ”

**0:38:12 Nancy Emerson:** Natural —

**0:38:15 Susan Reynolds:** Examples of what they do in the garden.” Anyway, that recognition led us to receiving a call from the National Horticulture Association. I was invited to go to Washington D.C. and do a presentation at the first ever symposium of children’s gardens in the U.S. And so I did a presentation, and it was on how do you do it, how do you put this together, how do you finance it, how do you collect, how do you

capture the community's attention and the buy-in? So I did a slide show. I had gone to the top of Horse Hill and photographed San Francisco in the background, and then drop down, drop down, drop down to our garden. When I showed this in Washington D.C., they did not believe that this was a public school: "You're kidding." They would not believe me. The garden was so stunning and just so like, "Oh my heavens." There were hawks soaring overhead, there were horses running on Horse Hill, there were snakes wrapped up in our plastic mesh that had to be carefully extracted. But at the symposium there was disbelief that this was actually a school garden because it was so, so beautiful, I mean really a wonderful example of what can happen.

**0:40:23 Nancy Emerson:** Right, and hopefully that inspired more.

**0:40:26 Susan Reynolds:** Yeah. Well, I think so. I had a lot of communication with people. They would email me, and I would get letters where they wanted information, they wanted to samples, they wanted a copy of our handbook, they wanted to know how we set it up, how we organized. So that was really something, things like that happened. But for me the biggest reward was working with the children in the garden because it's such a natural thing and they just couldn't get enough. So that to me was huge, and the fact that we were so fortunate in our timing with the transition, with parents being so open and enthusiastic, it really was probably an unusual situation and a very special one. We had master gardeners help us in the garden — Tony Macasich, who still is coming to the garden and helping. Then there was — I do not know her name, but she's the one that did the video that ended up Marin Television.

**0:41:41 Nancy Emerson:** Oh yeah, talk about that.

**0:41:42 Susan Reynolds:** She videoed the garden and all the different activities that the children participated in. Interestingly enough, I think it was given to a local television station, so any time there was a gap in their programming, they would put this video on. And it became quite funny. You'd be in the grocery store and they would say, "Oh, you're the television lady." Or, "You're the gardener. We saw you." In the local supermarket the parents would stop you and say, "I've gotta tell you what we talked about at dinner last night."

**0:42:19 Nancy Emerson:** That's nice.

**0:42:21 Susan Reynolds:** It was like, "You wouldn't believe the conversation that our family had." There were just all kinds of funny things too, I mean just little stories about —

**0:42:38 Nancy Emerson:** Do you want to tell any of those stories?

**0:42:41 Susan Reynolds:** Well, okay. Here's an example of the parent community. When we first moved into the garden, we had the test garden and it needed mulching over. And we only had one wheelbarrow. [chuckles] That's going to take awhile. So we visited the classrooms and asked what children knew about wheelbarrows in their

garages? [laughs] We had 19 children raise their hands and say, “Yeah, we have one of those.” And the next Saturday, 17 of them showed up with a parent to spend the day, or at least the morning as I recall, hauling compost to cover the beds for the fall.

**0:43:27:** And then the week we moved into the school, the beds were all laid out in 100 square foot rectangles. We planted four beds in spinach. Well, a month later we had a sale, fresh spinach. We could have sold a whole garden full of spinach. People were lined up. It was really a kind of nice. They came to buy the produce, which they still do, but to a lesser degree these days, I think. I don’t know why that is. It’s just that it’s different.

**0:44:22:** I think that having a produce sale was another aspect of the garden that was kind of fun. The children liked planting. They liked harvesting. They liked setting up the display. They liked making the charge. They liked manning the cash register and counting the money. So I mean, that was just another math class, something that they loved.

**0:44:56:** When we had open house at the school at the end of the year, the garden was just jam-packed with people. I remember the parents all staying around watching a family of gophers building a hole in the garden, in our entry, in our welcome garden. It was so funny because they were all fascinated. These gophers were so busy — well, of course, these gophers felt safe. [laughs] They were safe in our garden.

**0:45:25:** The other thing is, I may have mentioned that Suzanne Fraizer’s husband is a graphic designer and an artist, Craig Fraizer, and he designed the logo for our shirt. I don’t know whether I mentioned that, but he designed a picture of a child with a wheelbarrow and an immense pumpkin — and he has a very stylized type of art — which was on our shorts and sweatshirts. Oh, I have a really old one! The other thing is that when we moved into the garden, we wanted the children to design a great big welcome sign. It had to be the Mill Valley Children’s Garden, inclusive of all the schools, connected with the sharing of the garden. The children designed this wonderful big sign. It was probably six feet by five feet. It was big. A parent who was a Lucas Film artist painted it with the children’s help, and it was wonderful. I think it’s faded to behind the shed these days.

**0:46:53 Nancy Emerson:** I was going to say, “Is it still there?”

**0:46:55 Susan Reynolds:** It was pretty weathered, ’cause it was 1990 —

**0:47:00 Nancy Emerson:** Do you have photos of that old sign?

**0:47:01 Susan Reynolds:** I do. I brought some photos, and I’m still looking for more.

**0:47:06 Nancy Emerson:** Great.

**0:47:07 Susan Reynolds:** But anyway, it’s a very special place.



**0:47:14 Nancy Emerson:** It is. And it's nice to know that it's still going on, after however long that has been.

**0:47:24 Susan Reynolds:** Well 1990, 2000 —

**0:47:26 Nancy Emerson:** Almost 30 —

**0:47:28 Susan Reynolds:** Almost 30 years.

**0:47:30 Nancy Emerson:** And hopefully it continues into the future for —

**0:47:35 Susan Reynolds:** Well, one thing that the new parent who's now in charge of the gardens has done, she has developed a foundation for the garden called Friends of the Children's Garden, and it's a 501c3, in which she's working with a team of parents to fundraise.<sup>2</sup> Because a garden of this size does need physical labor aside from —

**0:48:09 Nancy Emerson:** Volunteers.

**0:48:12 Susan Reynolds:** Aside from the weed whacking — yes, from the volunteers. It does, because it's a big project.

**0:48:18 Nancy Emerson:** I got to look that up.

**0:48:20 Susan Reynolds:** It's alive and in progress, and I couldn't be more thrilled. Actually, it's one of the happiest, most fulfilling experiences I've had as an educator. The involvement in, the advocating and the developing of this outdoor learning lab has just been wonderful. It's been very, very special.

**0:48:49 Nancy Emerson:** I can tell that it's a legacy that you treasure.

**0:48:54 Susan Reynolds:** Yeah.

**0:48:56 Nancy Emerson:** It's wonderful to see that somebody can have that legacy to leave.

**0:49:01 Susan Reynolds:** It will find its way to evolve, and I'm sure that it will progress.

**0:49:13 Nancy Emerson:** Great. Are you ready to move on to some other areas of your life? You retired 20 years ago at least.

**0:49:22 Susan Reynolds:** Yeah.

**0:49:22 Nancy Emerson:** And you haven't been sitting at home watching TV, I don't think. [chuckles]

---

<sup>2</sup> It was Jackie Forest who founded the Friends of the Edna Maguire Children's Garden.—Susan Reynolds.

**0:49:25 Susan Reynolds:** No, not really.

**0:49:28 Nancy Emerson:** What have you done since 1997?

**0:49:30 Susan Reynolds:** When I retired, I wanted to go and sit quietly somewhere. [chuckles] Well, that didn't quite happen. So what I did was I gardened in my own garden. I had an opportunity to read a lot. I played classical piano, and I wanted to get back into piano, so I started lessons again. In addition to that, I realized after a while that I had been so busy with teaching and what an interesting experience it was to be spending time in a more quiet and reflective way. So I enjoyed my own home and my garden. And I do travel a great deal and enjoy that. Let me see, after seven years I realized that I missed community again. [chuckles] So at that point in 2004 I joined the Outdoor Art Club, and I've been very busy in that. Actually, they have garden tours.

**0:50:49 Nancy Emerson:** Before we go into depth, I'm just thinking that if somebody is listening or reading your oral history who doesn't know about that Outdoor Art Club, could you just briefly describe what it is?

**0:51:02 Susan Reynolds:** The Outdoor Art Club is a women's organization which was formed in 1902 by a group of 35 very civically-minded women who wanted to save Mill Valley from having all of the redwood trees cut down and to kind of be an environmental conscience for the city. So it was formed in '02, and they built a clubhouse at the corner of Throckmorton and East Blithedale two years later, and that's our clubhouse. It's on an acre of land and it's just a beautiful site. It's a site of many weddings and activities — it can be rented — but the big thing is that we have a very active organization of 400 women and, plus, long-term people have been involved for more than 40 years. We have weekly speakers discussing civics, conservation, literature. We had the Secretary of Defense — oh gosh, now I'm forgetting his name — he was there yesterday. We have speakers, luncheons and tea. We have many activities. It's a very active club and it's all volunteer. It's just a very, very busy place.

**0:52:45 Nancy Emerson:** So, you were inspired, and probably happy to join that organization, and what happened?

**0:52:52 Susan Reynolds:** I joined it in '04. I became involved in the garden tour. [chuckles] Should we guess on that one? For the garden tour I was transportation chairman the first year. The second year I was in charge of the whole thing. So it's like, "Okay, here we are back in the saddle." Then after that I became the grounds director for three years and was in charge of the maintenance, the organization and the planning for the entire site. I did that for three years. And then they said "Do you want to be president?" So I became president in 2011-2012. It was a year-long term. So I was basically on the board for about seven years, and I'm currently very involved in the by-laws and very involved in the fiscal advisory aspect of the club, in addition to enjoying the different interest groups, because we have lots of interest groups. Anyway, I'm very

involved in that. I'm stepping back a little bit to do a little clothes designing, and am personally enjoying the creative process.

**0:54:18 Nancy Emerson:** Another part of your creative side.

**0:54:21 Susan Reynolds:** Yeah, it's an interesting outlet. In college I took a class that was the hardest class I'd ever taken. But this is getting together with a group of Outdoor Art Club women and we help each other. So that's a very positive experience.

**0:54:40 Nancy Emerson:** Do you see a business out of this? Are you starting a business?

**0:54:43 Susan Reynolds:** Oh no, oh no. This is purely personal. I want to sit and be creative, if I can [chuckles]. The group helps each other with projects. I am taking a sewing class here at O'Hanlon Center separately. So that's just something I'm doing. For the last 30 years, I've traveled a lot and have enjoyed every moment of it. I'm very interested in cultures, history, and geography, geology.

**0:55:28 Nancy Emerson:** Are you doing Road Scholar type trips?

**0:55:33 Susan Reynolds:** Yes.

**0:55:33 Nancy Emerson:** What's the trip you've taken that you would like to talk about?

**0:55:37 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, golly. Well, I have done many overseas adventure travels. I did a Road Scholar trip. I took my granddaughter, and we went to Italy for three weeks at Christmas, and that was just wonderful, because it was intergenerational. She had kids to hang out with, and we just had a great time. I've taken some trips that I think have been very special. I've been to Bhutan. I spent a month in Bhutan, and people usually go to Bhutan for four to seven days. But I was with a UC alumni group, and it was very, very, very interesting. I've been to New Zealand, and on the Milford Track: Milford, Routeburn, and Queen Charlotte. I loved that. Let me see. I was in Crete and worked on a dig with UC Berkeley and University of Greensboro, North Carolina. I worked on a dig in the town of Mochlos on the island of Crete.

**0:57:04:** That was an interesting, interesting summer, and I guess one of the most fascinating things I've done. I love art. There was a film done about Chauvet, a 37,000-year-old cave of wall art that was sealed off by an avalanche. It was discovered in 1990 and it's in Southeast France. They built a \$60,000 replica. It's all digitized. It's all just an exact replica because of course it's this magnificent, magnificent cave on the Ardeche River. Anyway, going there with the Leakey Foundation who are friends of mine — they invited me to go. I was only in France a week that time, and it was just like, "Oh my gosh," just a completely thrilling experience.

**0:58:17 Nancy Emerson:** Can you go back? [laughs]

**0:58:17 Susan Reynolds:** I want to, oh yes. There are a few places left that I want to go to. I've been to South America, the Galapagos, and Machu Pichu. I'd go back to Machu Pichu, because we hiked in, and it was just like magic. These are just really memorable experiences. I started this after my kids were out of school. I just took off, and I traveled with friends and family, and we had a wonderful time. So, I count myself very, very fortunate.

**0:58:57 Nancy Emerson:** Yes. And you have lots of plans for the future, I imagine?

**0:59:01 Susan Reynolds:** Sewing. [chuckles]

**0:59:03 Nancy Emerson:** Sewing?

**0:59:05 Susan Reynolds:** No, I do. There are several places I want to go to.

**0:59:11 Nancy Emerson:** Good, good, that's exciting. Do you want to talk any more about your family members? You've talked about two grandchildren, I think.

**0:59:19 Susan Reynolds:** Well, I have a son who lives in Nevada City. And he recently remarried, so I'm very happy for them. He is one of these outdoor mountain kids, a master mechanic. He's into cars and the mountains. He has a son, and that grandson is a caterer in San Francisco. So he's leading a different lifestyle. And my daughter and her family live in Seattle. And my granddaughter who is 18 is a freshman at Chapman University in Southern California, and she's just so excited. She's quite a student and quite interested in everything, so I'm delighted. So that's it. I have a small family.

**1:00:19 Nancy Emerson:** Small but close.

**1:00:19 Susan Reynolds:** And my brother, my brother Paul does live over in Kensington, in our family's home.

**1:00:25 Nancy Emerson:** Oh wow. You're both stayers then. You said you've lived in your home for 55 years, and he has lived in his home for more than that. [chuckles]

**1:00:31 Susan Reynolds:** I've lived in two places in my life, Kensington and here.

**1:00:36 Nancy Emerson:** Wow.

**1:00:36 Susan Reynolds:** I said to someone recently "Well, am I stuck, or do I have a problem or what?" And they said "Well, it's not a bad place to be stuck." [chuckles]

**1:00:45 Nancy Emerson:** Exactly, yeah.

**1:00:46 Susan Reynolds:** So I do feel very blessed that I landed here in Mill Valley. I used to ride my bike to school when I was teaching or walk, and it was all so doable.

**1:01:01 Nancy Emerson:** Now, let's see. Before we go to another topic. What's your daughter's name?

**1:01:06 Susan Reynolds:** Jill Allyce Nickerson Flynn.

**1:01:08 Nancy Emerson:** Okay.

**1:01:09 Nancy Emerson:** Flynn is the married name.

**1:01:10 Susan Reynolds:** Yes.

**1:01:11 Nancy Emerson:** Okay, and then I was just going to ask you — you live near Boyle Park, and that's a wonderful neighborhood. Any stories about being in that area?

**1:01:22 Susan Reynolds:** Well, my kids spent a lot of time playing down there. There used to be a tree there and it fell down maybe 10 years ago. There was an immense oak tree and it tumbled. But other than the fact that we lived there, and we were on this little street East Manor — it was kind of tucked away, and it was just an ideal place, close to the park, and close to school, and so on. But it was interesting when my daughter got married, we had the reception at the house and what happened was they walked up from the car, the limo carrying them couldn't make it up our street, and so they had to walk from Boyle Park up. So there was a whole procession going up the street — I guess it would be Sydney, yeah, up Sydney Street. Oh my gosh. They remembered her when she was little.

**1:02:38 Nancy Emerson:** Well, expanding beyond Boyle, maybe one last area to touch on is your 55 years in Mill Valley. You've seen changes.

**1:02:49 Susan Reynolds:** Oh my!

**1:02:50 Nancy Emerson:** Is there anything in particular that comes to mind?

**1:02:52 Susan Reynolds:** Well, traffic. [chuckles] When we moved here, it was a rusty dusty little town. There was a slower pace. There was a wonderful German bakery. There was a creamery downtown. I think it was before La Ginestra even moved into that site. There was the Curtis photo gallery, or the Indian photo gallery, which then burned down. I think there was one stop light in town and that was right at the Camino Alto-Blithedale intersection. That was the only stop light. The other thing is that we used to go down right where the parking lot for the recreation center is. There used to be a corral, and we'd down and watch the horses, we'd watch them practice dressage and, you know, ride. So that was there, and there was this little tiny kind of — it looked like a shed that was our recreation center. So that was very, very different. I'm trying to think.

**1:04:14 Nancy Emerson:** Besides the creamery and the La Ginestra, were there are other places downtown that you used to frequent?

**1:04:21 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, there was a bookstore. There were two elderly ladies who had a bookstore in about the location where La Ginestra and Edwards were, but you had to climb ladders to find books. They were these charming elderly ladies. And across the street next to the Throckmorton Theatre there was a yarn shop that had wonderful yarns, and there'd be a group of, I want to say elderly ladies, but not necessarily elderly, but always a group sitting around knitting.

**1:05:20:** And one little thing about the Outdoor Art Club is that I think they named the streets — Sycamore, Catalpa, and so on. And they used to pay the children a penny to collect worms: the tent caterpillar, the oak moth worms. There were things like that that were kind of funny little stories. Oh, by the way, the Outdoor Art Club was — If I might digress on that just a second — was the first library in town, a place where we housed the first library, it was a well-baby clinic. I think when there were fires that it became a place where they took care of people. I do remember downtown getting my library card from the old —

**1:06:17 Nancy Emerson:** Carnegie library.

**1:06:18 Susan Reynolds:** Yes, the old library. I have that card still.

**1:06:21 Nancy Emerson:** Do you?

**1:06:21 Susan Reynolds:** It's wonderful. I love it. I used to go through the stacks and it was just quite an experience. Let me see. Well, there used to be Old Brown's Store. It has come and gone. And there was Dimitroff's Frame Store at the end of Throckmorton, which is now a brewery or a beer place.

**1:06:56 Nancy Emerson:** Beer place yeah. You know in last year's history walk, that you mentioned earlier, we talked about a shopping center that was on E. Blithedale, quite close to Sycamore, close to the intersection. Did you shop there?

**1:07:10 Susan Reynolds:** Well, I will tell you what was there when I moved there. There was a Cadillac dealership, or there was a dealership right at the corner of Throckmorton — no, Blithedale and Sycamore. There was a car dealership, there was Lawson Dyer pharmacy, there was Strob- something or other, now it's a furniture store. I remember having them help me with something about the house. It was a hardware —

**1:07:45 Nancy Emerson:** There was a hardware store. I'm not sure if it was still there.

**1:07:48 Susan Reynolds:** There was Varney's downtown.

**1:07:50 Nancy Emerson:** They had an extension, or a second location, apparently in that shopping center.

**1:07:57 Susan Reynolds:** Oh, okay.

**1:07:57 Nancy Emerson:** And that Food Mart? Was the Food Mart still there?

**1:08:02 Susan Reynolds:** Oh my goodness, yes.

**1:08:03 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah, which would have been convenient to you.

**1:08:05 Susan Reynolds:** Oh yes, it was. You're right. I forgot about that one.

**1:08:11 Nancy Emerson:** It's kind of shame that that went out of business.

**1:08:13 Susan Reynolds:** Well, it was small. It was wonderful though because they knew everybody in the neighborhood.

**1:08:19 Nancy Emerson:** Good.

**1:08:19 Susan Reynolds:** And that was so nice. You know, when my children were babies, I could call the Mill Valley Market when my husband was out of town and they would deliver my groceries. They would deliver my groceries if I got into a jam. But the Food Mart was something. And Jerry, Jerry was the meat guy in the Mill Valley Food Mart. He was helpful. I remember I was looking at the meat one day and frowning and he says, "Now wait a minute, that's not allowed." I wasn't supposed to frown. "Let's have a smile." [chuckles] Oh, but you know, kind of taking care of everybody's mood, and so on. But thank you for mentioning that. I had forgotten that there was more than just the dealership which has evolved to the printing place and now who knows what.

**1:09:10 Nancy Emerson:** Right. But they've restored the look of the dealership to the building which is going to be interesting.

**1:09:17 Susan Reynolds:** I like the improvement. It was needing some renovation.

**1:09:21 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah.

**1:09:21 Susan Reynolds:** So I'm trying to think of other places in Mill Valley. I remember shopping at Safeway. That was 55 years ago. It's the same Safeway. I keep thinking they'd upgrade or do something. I love what they've done to Tam.

**1:09:44 Nancy Emerson:** The high school.

**1:09:45 Susan Reynolds:** Tam High. They've painted it and kind of spruced it up. And my kids loved going to school there. It was a wonderful education for them. My daughter is a graphic designer, and an event planner, so she has her own business in Seattle. They loved Tam. My son played football and my daughter played soccer.

**1:10:10 Nancy Emerson:** Yeah, of course.

**1:10:12 Susan Reynolds:** People are very busy with this these days.

**1:10:18 Nancy Emerson:** It's an integral part of the community, I think, and obviously you took advantage of that.

**1:10:23 Susan Reynolds:** Oh yeah, absolutely. It's a very special place to live. It's a special place to have taught, and to have raised my children.

**1:10:32 Nancy Emerson:** That might be a good way to wrap this up, unless you have anything else that you think we should be sure to include in this.

**1:10:39 Susan Reynolds:** I don't want to ramble on. [chuckles]

**1:10:41 Nancy Emerson:** No. It's been really fun talking to you, Susan, and thank you for sharing your history, but also for what you contributed to the town. It's quite a legacy.

**1:10:54 Susan Reynolds:** Everyone does what they can, and I've certainly enjoyed my life and what I've done.

**1:11:01 Nancy Emerson:** Great.

**1:11:02 Susan Reynolds:** Thank you. It's very nice talking with you, Nancy.

**1:11:05 Nancy Emerson:** Alright, we'll end it there.

**1:11:08 Susan Reynolds:** Okay.