Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

Ken Bovero

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2019

TITLE: Oral History of Ken Bovero
INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
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In this oral history, arborist and entrepreneur Ken Bovero recounts his life, work, and love of trees. Born in San Francisco in 1961, Ken moved to Mill Valley with his family when he was three years old. Ken recollects his wild teenage years and then describes the about-face he made at the age of 17, when he started his tree business. Ken shares his first encounter with Sudden Oak Death, a tree illness that he was the first to identify, and discusses in detail its causes, symptoms, and treatment. Because of his expertise on the subject, Ken recounts being contracted by the city of Mill Valley to take down hundreds of stricken trees. Additionally, he discusses working with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area on various large restoration projects, such as the one at Muir Beach. Ken speaks candidly about an inner conflict he increasingly feels between the desire to save trees and his enjoyment in bringing them down, and in conclusion he shares some stories of intense experiences he has had working high up in the trees.

Oral History of Ken Bovero

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

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is October 22nd, 2019, and my name is Debra Schwartz. I'm with the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library. I'm very pleased to be here today on a beautiful fall day with Ken Bovero, correct?

0:00:19 Ken Bovero: Bovero, yes.

0:00:20 Debra Schwartz: Bovero. And you're going tell me about that name.

0:00:23 Ken Bovero: Yes, I will.

0:00:24 Debra Schwartz: Ken, you're owner of Marin County Arborists. You're a native of Marin. You hold certificates from the International Society of Arboriculture, as well as the National Arborist Association, and you're a member of the California Arborists. What else?

0:00:42 Ken Bovero: I started my company in 1980 shortly after high school. Our projects range from small residential to large government removal projects. We are a family operated company. My oldest daughter, Mackenzi Bovero, runs my office for me, and I'm the proud father of two other daughters, Taylor and Courtney. There's never a dull moment in my life, juggling a business in Marin and traveling to Jacksonville, Oregon, where I own a beautiful home and live with my fiancé Melanie Lively and my three stepchildren, Emma, Jeremy, and Sarah.[1]

0:01:11 Debra Schwartz: And you really are — I've known you on and off over the years in the capacity of your work — you really are a Marin County boy.

0:01:28 Ken Bovero: I am truly. I was born in '61 in San Francisco, and I moved to Marin in 1963 as a young hippie kid with a brother and, unfortunately, a recently deceased sister.

0:01:43 Debra Schwartz: And their names?

0:01:45 Ken Bovero: Catherine was my sister who passed away at nine with cystic fibrosis, and then my brother Bobby who was five years old. Bobby Bovero was just a bit of a wild child from the day he was born, and he still is to this day. I was three years old.

0:01:57 Debra Schwartz: Wilder than you?

0:02:00 Ken Bovero: Wilder than me, believe it or not, yes.

[1] This paragraph was added by Ken Bovero while reviewing the original transcript.—Editor.

[laughter]

0:02:01 Debra Schwartz: That says a lot.

0:02:02 Ken Bovero: Yeah, well, 40 years of a career convict, tattoos covering his neck and his whole body, and 40 years of heroin addiction as well. It's unfortunate, but there's not much I can do. I've spent a lifetime trying to help him and save him. And I realized that it's just something he has to do for himself. I have no control.

0:02:22 Debra Schwartz: So, you've seen a lot of different faces of the county.

0:02:24 Ken Bovero: I have.

0:02:25 Debra Schwartz: Well, first of all, I want to say thank you for coming to Mill Valley Public Library. You're an outdoor guy.

0:02:30 Ken Bovero: Yes.

0:02:31 Debra Schwartz: It's a busy season for you, and I really appreciate you taking the time to come share your story with the Mill Valley Historical Society and the library.

0:02:39 Ken Bovero: You're very welcome. I enjoy sharing my story, so it's great to be here.

0:02:43 Debra Schwartz: Is there anything that we shouldn't talk about?

0:02:45 Ken Bovero: Nothing whatsoever.

0:02:46 Debra Schwartz: You're an open book.

0:02:47 Ken Bovero: I am.

0:02:48 Debra Schwartz: Good. Alright, let's start. Let's start with a little bit about you growing up here in Marin County. Can you remember what it was like? You know what? Hold that thought. Let's start with your family. Let's start with how your family came to San Francisco. You've got an Italian name.

0:03:11 Ken Bovero: I do. Okay. So my grandfather, Philip Bovero, had come over on a boat in the early 1900s with a group of his friends and landed in New York. Then he went and lived in Utah, where he met my grandmother, Verna, that he married. And so Verna and Philip ended up having my father, Robert Bovero, and my uncle, Jim Bovero. The families had their own children, so my cousins as well. My grandfather was a very astute musician. He played the clarinet, the saxophone, and the piano, and wrote music. He traveled the Bay Area doing the whole jazz scene in the '40s and '50s. And during Prohibition, he was creating or making his own alcohol in his basement.

0:04:27 Debra Schwartz: He was a bootlegger.

0:04:27 Ken Bovero: He was a bootlegger.

0:04:27 Debra Schwartz: Where was he living?

0:04:27 Ken Bovero: He was living down in the avenues by SI [Saint Ignatius]. I wish I could remember —

0:04:34 Debra Schwartz: There were places, like in his basement —

0:04:38 Ken Bovero: In his basement. His friends would come over and drink with him. Yeah, it was crazy. He'd write music and drink. He was just such a character.

0:04:48 Debra Schwartz: I've never heard of bootleggers in the avenues, but why not, right?

0:04:51 Ken Bovero: He'd do it for himself. He wouldn't do it to sell it. He'd make his alcohol for him and his friends to share.

0:04:58 Debra Schwartz: I guess you could say he was kind of practical. If you can't buy it, make it. I bet you he wasn't the only one.

0:05:03 Ken Bovero: Oh, I'm sure he wasn't. No, I would imagine that he and his friends were all doing this.

0:05:08 Debra Schwartz: So how about your mother's family?

0:05:10 Ken Bovero: So, my mother's family, Bertram Hughes, my mother's father, a very interesting story. He was the first one to import Datsun and Toyota to the United States. He was a body man and was there when they created Bondo. He was part of the initial tests and the process of creating Bondo and took his money that he had made and invested it in shipping cars from Japan to the piers, where Pac Bell Park is, where the Giants play. This was his business. So he'd set up these shipping containers stuffed with vehicles that his employees would drive up and out and into this huge warehouse. And then he had a big dispute with the trucking company that he was working with, so he ended up buying his own trucking business and expanded it. He was a very dynamic man. He drank a lot, partied a lot. You'd usually find him out and about at the local bars. He was the Golden Gloves boxing champion in San Francisco for three years, when they used to fight with their hands stacked like this, as opposed to the current day style. He was a character.

0:06:35 Debra Schwartz: Well, I can imagine based on what I can see, but what those listening to us right now don't see is how brawny you are.

0:06:41 Ken Bovero: Yes.

0:06:42 Debra Schwartz: I mean you look like the consummate lumberjack, so he must have been like that.

0:06:48 Ken Bovero: Yeah, he was. And I boxed for several years myself, and unfortunately I would carry that out drinking with my friends, so I'd have to be careful of my actions, because I've always been kind of wired that same way.

0:07:08 Debra Schwartz: He must have been in a few brawls in his time.

0:07:10 Ken Bovero: Yes, he was, good old San Francisco heart, he was right in the middle of it.

0:07:19 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh.

0:07:20 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:07:21 Debra Schwartz: But you ended up coming to Mill Valley.

0:07:24 Ken Bovero: I did.

0:07:25 Debra Schwartz: And how did that happen?

0:07:27 Ken Bovero: You know, when my father met my mother, she was 17 and she was in high school. She was a child, and she was pregnant. He was 19 and she was 17, and little did they know that they were both carriers of cystic fibrosis. So my sister Catherine was born with cystic fibrosis, and they didn't know until two or three years in. I remember her was when I was in a crib and she slept in a tented bed with a ventilation system coming in to keep her lungs as clear as they could with the medicines that they had available at the time. When she passed at nine, I was three and my brother Bobby was five.

0:08:22: That split my parents up. My mother never got to really discover who she was because she was a child having children and found herself gravitating more towards the '60s and the hippie movement, and they were kind of growing apart. So that was a separation point for them. And then she started hanging out with Joe Faracas, who was a photographer and owned some of those flower power stores down by Alioto's at the wharf. He had stores down there. He made leather goods, he was a real interesting character, and lived up here on Lovell Avenue, up in this little shack where we moved into with him in about, '67? No, it was before that, excuse me, because that was '63 — about '64 or '65. So we lived there, my brother and I, my sister had passed, we lived there in his house with him.

0:09:35 Debra Schwartz: So your mom's only in her mid-20s by then.

0:09:37 Ken Bovero: Yes, exactly, just a young woman, and Joe Faracas was at least 20 years older than she was.

0:09:47 Debra Schwartz: Did you like him?

0:09:48 Ken Bovero: You know I didn't, because he wasn't my father and there was a side to him that was just different. It was something I wasn't used to. So, not really, but that was a short-lived relationship, and then we moved to the Molino side, up from the 2 AM Club, as you'd go up Laverne, you make a right on Molino. So we lived on that steep part of the Molino, of Molino Avenue, and we stayed there — wait there's one piece I'm missing. When she split up with Joe Faracas, we moved to 44 Helens Lane, where we were for about three years. That's right. It had a beautiful Eucalyptus —

0:10:28 Debra Schwartz: Over, right where it meets Birch, right around there?

0:10:31 Ken Bovero: Exactly. It was like three houses before that. It was on that curve right before you'd come to where Birch is. And I remember my friend Tim Rack lived right across the street, and an ex-49er football player, Elmer Collett, lived in a big house right down the street. So that's exactly it, it was right there. We had a big beautiful Eucalyptus tree in the yard there.

0:10:51 Debra Schwartz: There were horses there, and I remember there were corrals up at the end of Birch.

0:10:56 Ken Bovero: Interesting.

0:10:57 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember that?

0:10:58 Ken Bovero: I don't remember that.

0:11:00 Debra Schwartz: Ah. In the '70s, there was.

0:11:01 Ken Bovero: So that was where Mr. Robinson — did you ever do the story about Mr. Robinson from the military, the old train? I went to school with the girl that did the interview and wrote a book about the old steam train, or the old push train. Anyways, it's somewhere in here in these archives. He was an interesting character. He's one of my tree clients. I'd love to hang out with him.

0:11:22: So anyway, so then we lived on Helens Lane for about three years, and then my mother met a piano teacher, hippie guy, George Dunnebacke. And so George Dunnebacke was a Cal grad, my mother's age, and then she had a daughter, my sister Elizabeth, who is now a film producer and who went to Brown University. My mother saw the direction that my brother and I were going in, and she's like, "Brakes, wait, no. We're going this way." It was a quick change of direction because my brother and were getting in trouble a lot.

0:12:05 Debra Schwartz: What schools did you go to? Old Mill?

0:12:08 Ken Bovero: We went to Old Mill School, went kindergarten through second grade, started third grade at Homestead School, and then went third through fifth at Homestead, then went to Mill Valley Middle School, and then Tam High, where I left before I was supposed to graduate, and started climbing trees.

0:12:28 Debra Schwartz: When would you have graduated?

0:12:31 Ken Bovero: 1980.

0:12:32 Debra Schwartz: Who were your friends back in the —

0:12:35 Ken Bovero: My friends back in those days were some troubled kids. I was hanging out with troubled kids. My brother and I were kind of left to fend for ourselves. My mother having a career working at UCSF in the city for a doctor, so she'd get on the bus early in the morning and usually wouldn't come back until six in the evening, so my brother and I would just fend for ourselves.

0:13:01: And Mill Valley was such a different place at that time. There was this element of kids building hot rods and motorcycles and people like my good friend Michael Bowen, who's an actor, who spent years acting. *Breaking Bad* was one of the more recent pieces of work he did, *Jackie Brown*, a whole host of other things, some of the Tarantino films. Another amazing physical specimen of a human being, Dwight Popson, about 6'4" and 255 pounds, was the heavyweight boxing champ for the Marine Corps and he punched out his drill sergeant because he got in an argument with him. And here he was released back into Mill Valley where his father lived and just was the toughest, strongest guy.

0:13:50 Debra Schwartz: So, this would have been in what year? In the late '70s?

0:13:55 Ken Bovero: This is about '79, '80, when he gets out on his dishonorable discharge after doing a year in their brig, and here's this big old guy that we knew from when we were kids. He was the only guy in Little League that could hit the ball from the diamond, one diamond on one side, all the way over to the other side, just his hand-eye coordination. He'd beat you in tennis, ping pong, pool, volleyball. I mean, he was an amazing athlete.

0:14:26: And his kid brother, the runt of the family — both of these characters worked on and off for me over the years doing tree work because they were physical specimens, and so I was like, "I need to put them to work to help me do tree work." They'd be carrying logs with me up hills and brush. Ted Popson spent three years with the San Francisco 49ers and got a Super Bowl ring in 1995, and three years with the Kansas City Chiefs, went there with Joe Montana. So, kind of neat, interesting history of this Del Casa area over by Boyle Park where these two brothers grew up.

0:15:01 Debra Schwartz: And at that time also, by the ’70s, some of the musicians were moving into Mill Valley. When you think of a typical Mill Valley day in your childhood, what do you see? You’re going down the road, what’s it like? Where are you going?

0:15:19 Ken Bovero: Usually we’re gonna march downtown and we’re gonna stomp through the creek. We’re gonna enter the creek at Old Mill Park and we’re gonna walk through downtown and pop out down by where Earl Johnson had his dentist practice down past the lumber company. And we’re gonna search for crawdads on the way. And so, and then there goes Sammy Hagar, Neal Schon, and Elton John. I remember my girlfriend Tara, when I was in high school, was hitchhiking her way to school and was picked up by Elton John, her and her girlfriend, in his big white Rolls Royce. I guess, he was in town to record because they had that recording studio in Sausalito where all these musicians were recording.

0:15:58 Debra Schwartz: Right, the Plant.

0:16:00 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:16:01 Debra Schwartz: And they had their Plant house over in Tam Junction where the musicians would stay.

0:16:05 Ken Bovero: That’s interesting because I remember my first experience of Huey Lewis was when they called themselves Clover, and I believe it was because they bought a Clover milk van that said Clover on the side. When I was going to Homestead School, we used to walk across the street and sit down while they were jamming and playing music. So it was interesting to be in and amongst all of that.

0:16:30: A girl that I knew started dating Tommy Johnson of the Doobie Brothers. And so this whole history of rock ’n’ roll musicians, seeing them driving around town, Sammy Hagar and even Father Guido Sarducci. Don Novello was a tree client of mine for years, and it took me a while to figure it out. I’m looking out thinking —

0:16:54 Debra Schwartz: You mean from —

0:16:56 Ken Bovero: San Anselmo.

0:16:56 Debra Schwartz: What was he on, *Laugh-In*?

0:16:58 Ken Bovero: *Saturday Night Live*.

0:17:00 Debra Schwartz: *Saturday Night Live*, right.

0:17:01 Ken Bovero: Yeah, Father Guido Sarducci.

0:17:01 Debra Schwartz: Right, gosh.

0:17:02 Ken Bovero: He'd been my client for three years, four years, and I'd meet with him and I kept thinking, "I know him from somewhere." And then we were walking through his garage and he had posters of Father Guido Sarducci on the inside of his garage, and I said, "That's where I know you from." He seemed like just a normal character, but I knew I knew him outside of this context from somewhere else, and so I figured it out as I saw the poster walking by.

0:17:27 Debra Schwartz: Did you hang out with the Choulos brothers?

0:17:29 Ken Bovero: I did. When I was finding myself wanting to get away from this madness and mayhem and theft and crime and drinking and fighting, I did an about face. My years from when I was 16 'til I was 19 were pretty rough. A lot of scrapping and just drinking and partying, and some cocaine in there — young kids trying to find their way through life and with no supervision. So, those were rough years, and so I did an about face. My friends were going to prison, my friends were dying. Sarah Noonie, who grew up on Ethel, terrible motorcycle accident, high on drugs, decapitated. Fred O'Neal, good friend of mine, died of AIDS from a blood transfusion and a motorcycle accident that we were involved in together. I witnessed him crash and split his head open, and spend six months in the hospital.

0:18:32: The craziness of that lifestyle — I knew that there was a bigger and better person inside of me. So I did an about face, and I went completely the other direction. I stopped going out. I stopped hanging out with these friends. They'd call me, and I'd say, "No, I'm really busy, I'm working." I really focused my effort and energy into work. I was working six or seven days a week, passing out flyers when I wasn't working.

0:19:01 Debra Schwartz: Is this you starting your business?

0:19:02 Ken Bovero: Yes, this is me starting my business at 17 and a half.

0:19:06 Debra Schwartz: But did you know about trees at the time or you just jumped in?

0:19:09 Ken Bovero: So here's an interesting story: I knew about trees because of a friend of mine, Louie Brun, and a guy named John Black, and another character that I knew, Joey Adelman. Joey Adelman was really the spearhead to all these Mill Valley tree guys getting into the tree business. His mother dated a guy named Dwight Barringer, and Dwight Barringer was this rough tree guy. You'd usually find him at the bar, he drank all the time. And he was one of the five tree guys in Marin in the late '70s, early '80s. And so, he taught Joey Adelman the skill of climbing trees, and Joey Adelman taught Louie and John Black the same skill. So, I saw this young kid, John Black, who was, I guess, my age, maybe a year younger, driving this nice truck, and he always had all this brush in the back. I said, "Hey, I wanna come work with you. I wanna see how you're doing this, and what's going on." So, I went to work with him, and I learned a little bit. But he and I clashed. There wasn't a real bond between us. So, I was looking through the gazette that

we used to have, the *Marin County Gazette*, and I saw some tree gear and some chainsaws for sale. It was $600 for the gear and the chainsaw, so I asked my grandfather if I could borrow the money. I told him I'd pay him back.

0:20:39 Debra Schwartz: The one that made the liquor?

0:20:41 Ken Bovero: No, this is the Bertram Hughes. The one that had the cars.

0:20:45 Debra Schwartz: Okay. He probably had a buck or two to spend.

0:20:47 Ken Bovero: He was an entrepreneur, so I knew that he would take a liking to this. And he graciously did it, and I paid him back. But I told the guy, he was a cabbie, the guy that I brought it from — he drove a Mill Valley cab, and on the side he was doing tree work to make extra money, and he was tired doing it 'cause it was hard work. So, I said, "Look, I'm gonna buy this gear, but you need to spend three hours with me teaching me how to tie these knots and get up the tree." So, that's all I needed. I'd already been scurrying up trees with the chainsaw at my mother's house and doing trimming of all her acacias, so I had some hands-on experience. Once he'd spent three hours with me, I felt like, "Oh, I've got this." So, I started making flyers and I jumped on my mother's bicycle. I had a rack on the front, and I'm passing out flyers, and still living —

0:21:42 Debra Schwartz: So, you're going around Mill Valley passing out flyers?

0:21:44 Ken Bovero: I am.

0:21:46 Debra Schwartz: And of course, people know you as a local boy.

0:21:48 Ken Bovero: They did. And I'd get in trouble from the post office. Occasionally, they'd call me and say, "Hey, you can't put things in the post office in someone's mailbox without postage on it." I'm like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." So then, I started sticking them on the flag on the side, and then I got in trouble, so then I'd put them on the doors. And I had my mother help me create this flyer. At the time, I was about 18, still getting in trouble and doing this on the side to make money. But by the time I had redirected my energy, I put full focus into my business and started to grow the company, which was fun. I was a terrible student in school, I just couldn't focus. So, when I found a way to pinpoint my energy into one subject, then my mind came alive. Then all of a sudden, marketing, adding equipment, and bringing in new people to help — it was fun because I loved it, and I found something to focus all this wild energy into. The next thing I knew, I was 24 years old, and had seven full-time employees and was making $100,000 a year doing tree work.

0:23:04 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:23:05 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:23:06 Debra Schwartz: So, you were mentioning about the Choulos boys. Where did they fit in? I ask about the Choulos family because in 1980 I actually went to their house. My boyfriend at the time took me over to say, "Hi." I ran out of there and I never went back because —

0:23:22 Ken Bovero: Yeah, I don't blame you. Good idea.

[laughter]

0:23:25 Debra Schwartz: It was wild.

0:23:27 Ken Bovero: It was very wild.

0:23:28 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:23:28 Ken Bovero: It was very wild. That was an interesting side of my life, a shift 'cause it was —

0:23:34 Debra Schwartz: That you went away from that to the trees?

0:23:35 Ken Bovero: I went away from my friends that were causing this madness and mayhem and robbing and thievery and drinking and partying all weekend, to something that seemed more balance and stable.

[laughter]

0:23:47 Debra Schwartz: Oh my God.

0:23:49 Ken Bovero: Their family unit was incredibly strong. They all really looked out for each other. And I was a handsome young guy, but the womanizing aspect of it was something I wasn't familiar with. So, all of a sudden, I'm like, "Wow, interesting. This is a different life."

0:24:07 Debra Schwartz: And all the beautiful women.

0:24:09 Ken Bovero: All the beautiful women.

0:24:09 Debra Schwartz: And that lovely huge house.

0:24:10 Ken Bovero: That huge mansion with peacocks and underwater sound and the swimming pool.

0:24:15 Debra Schwartz: The name of that house is —

0:24:17 Ken Bovero: The Burlwood Estate.

0:24:19 Debra Schwartz: The Burlwood Estate, over in Cascade Canyon.

0:24:19 Ken Bovero: Exactly, and the history —

0:24:23 Debra Schwartz: And the bowling alley.

0:24:23 Ken Bovero: The bowling alley, and the guest house, and the cast of characters associated with Vasilios Choulos, the father. They're like the Kennedys of Marin. That was my experience.

0:24:40 Debra Schwartz: A lot of nice cars in that home.

0:24:41 Ken Bovero: A lot of nice cars. Rolls-Royces and Porsches. And I'm still friends with all the boys.

0:24:47 Debra Schwartz: Their names?

0:24:48 Ken Bovero: James is the youngest, James Choulos. Steve Choulos is my age. Alex Choulos is just a year above me. So, they had their children fairly close. Then there's Anastasia and then there's George Choulos, the oldest brother, who's a very responsible, very good attorney. They're all lawyers, except for Anastasia, the daughter. She chose not to go to law school, but they're all attorneys. It was an interesting time in my life 'cause I was running from one thing and seeing what looked like a family unit, which it was. It was very tight. But the fun and the beach house, and the parties, and the women, I was like, "Wow, this is a whole different lifestyle." I was kind of shocked by all that as well, and then I found myself immersed in it, and like, "How did they do this and how are they meeting these women?" And then all of a sudden, next thing you know I'm enthralled in it myself.

0:25:54: My wiring is a little different. But it was interesting, and it was a fun time, and it was a time of growth. Reflecting back on it, the reality is I wouldn't change anything about my life — all the ups and downs and ebbs and flows. It creates who we are as a person. And I'm kind of an ebb and flow type of person. I roll with it. And so, I enjoyed that phase of my life, and there was parts of it that inspired me to build my own, to create my own family because of the family unit and the unity that they had. They really looked out for each other, and that was something I had admired. And those boys all slept in. I couldn't sleep past 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning because I was up to do tree work early in the morning and getting ready for the day.

0:26:51 Ken Bovero: So Vasilios and I we'd sit down and have coffee together. I'm 20 years old, 21 years old, 23 years old. And we'd go out and work in the garden together. We'd rake up leaves and trim stuff, and I'd prune his apple tree, and he'd clean up after me. I really created a valuable friendship with him and saw a gentle, kind side of that man. He was very cerebral. He spent a lot of time in his head just processing and thinking things through, but he was an amazing trial lawyer as well. But yeah, there were some pretty intense fun parties there.

0:27:35 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh, I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

0:27:38 Ken Bovero: Some people stayed and hung out.

0:27:41 Debra Schwartz: So, now you're in your mid-20s, you're making 100 grand a year, which is great. In Marin County at that time, there is cash flowing.

0:27:50 Ken Bovero: There is an influx of money, and I capitalized on it. In a sense, I capitalized on my own human nature, that's what I did. I ended up being in the right place, at the right time. And not many of my friends were able to do so because they were working for other people, so they'd have to run a little bit farther north to afford the rents.

0:28:16 Debra Schwartz: Where were you living then?

0:28:19 Ken Bovero: I was living in Tam Valley. I moved on to Browning when I was about 20. I rented the downstairs on my mother's house for years, 'til I was about 21, when she was on Molino Avenue, 486 Molino Avenue, just up from the 2 AM Club, where we lived for years, all through my Homestead School years, all through my high school years.

0:28:45: There was a little bit of trauma that happened that made my mother never want to go back to the house, a little bit of a frightening story. The Choulos' boys had pulled up in some new Cuda, some really cool hot rod that they had just bought. And as we're heading up the hill, I see these characters coming down, looking up at my house and my sister's there. And I said, "Hey, you guys have to turn around," I said. "There's something weird. These guys are slowing down, looking up at my house." "Oh, you're being paranoid. Don't freak out."

0:29:18: So, my brother in jail had set up some drug deal with these guys from Oakland, and so next thing you know, it's probably fortunate that I didn't go back 'cause they kicked down the door of the house with pistols and pistol-whipped my sister Elizabeth, and cased the house. It was so traumatic for my mother, she never went back to the house. So, she rented over on Seminary. She says, "You boys are on your own. I don't want any of this type of stuff." It was Bobby's stuff, but we were both kind of trying to find our way through life, and she was trying to create her own life after all these years. So, she moved over to Seminary and we were kind of left to fend for ourselves. That's when I did live at the Choulos house for a while trying to find my way and helping them work on their cars and helping Bill work in the garden.

0:30:15: And so, then I moved to Browning Drive over in Tam Valley, and I lived there for about a year and a half, parking motorcycles in the kitchen, riding them right into the house and parking there. I had all my tree trucks and tree equipment there and chainsaws in the garage. And the landlord didn't like it. It was a little too crazy, so I ended up moving around the corner to 611 Glenwood Avenue. And this about '90. No, no, wait a minute, what am I saying? This is a '85. It's 1985.

0:31:02: So, I rent this house from Rich Mattos, who had a partnership in the 2 AM Club, and he owned the 7-Eleven franchise. And so, ’85, I rented that house and I lived there for many years. I rented for 10 years, ended up buying the house from him, asking if I could buy it, purchase it from him, and he carried the note. Then in ’99, I tore it down and built about 4,000 square feet of just beautiful craftsman style home. And then in ’06, I sold it and moved to Southern Oregon and split my time, back and forth. So anyway, back to those days. Let me see, where should we pick up?

0:31:50 Debra Schwartz: I think we should go into your business. Somewhere along the way you started getting better educated in regard to your work.

0:32:00 Ken Bovero: I did.

0:32:01 Debra Schwartz: You were hyper-focused.

0:32:04 Ken Bovero: Hyper-focused.

0:32:04 Debra Schwartz: On doing what you needed to do to become a legitimate business owner.

0:32:07 Ken Bovero: Yup, I was.

0:32:07 Debra Schwartz: And you had found a way that you could capitalize on the best of yourself, and I guess leave the worst of it behind.

0:32:14 Ken Bovero: Exactly. And so here’s how that looked. I wanted to know my trade. So, here I was, I found myself immersed in tree work and I’m like, “Okay, I need to make the best version of myself that I can.” So I started reading books by a PhD arborist, botanist, horticulturist, plant pathologist, Dr. Richard Harris and Dr. Alex Shigo. I immersed myself in reading and understanding and taking in what I could. And once I got through that I thought, “Well, I need to get my arborist certification, because this will validate me as an arborist.” So, I started with the National Arborist Association, which was an easier program, flew through that certification, which was very easy. Then I decided to take on my arborist certification, and flew through that really well, so that was nice. And then I thought, “Well, I might as well line up a contractor’s license since they’re requiring that for arborists doing tree work in the state of California.” You had to have a contractor’s license as of, I think it was ’87 or something. Anybody that was doing any type of contracting had to have a license. So then I jumped on that bandwagon and ended up getting my contractor’s license as well.

0:33:34 Debra Schwartz: When is it that you first started seeing evidence of Sudden Oak Death?

0:33:38 Ken Bovero: With regards to Sudden Oak Death, my first experience was in ’91 or 1992. And it was at 321 Evergreen Drive, in Kentfield. My client, Don Lewis —

0:33:54 Debra Schwartz: Don Lewis.

0:33:56 Ken Bovero: Different Don Lewis.

0:33:57 Debra Schwartz: Oh. [chuckles]

0:33:57 Ken Bovero: Luckily. [chuckles] 'Cause I know the other Don Lewis, too. But a different one.

0:34:02 Debra Schwartz: Oh, okay.

0:34:02 Ken Bovero: Yeah, very different Don Lewis. So, it was interesting 'cause it was something I had never seen, which was very fine micro sawdust, wood boring holes and then there was a sap exuding, like it almost looks like molasses coming out of the tree. And if you touch it and smell it, it smells like a freshly uncorked bottle of a good quality Merlot or Cabernet. So, it's a fermentation process that occurs underneath the bark. Basically, the tree's natural response mechanism is to try to push a disease out, but the Phytophthora disease is so aggressive that it can fight the tree faster than the tree can fight the disease. Trees have a great capability of fighting off various different insects and other fungi, but some of them are so aggressive that it's just impossible. So, I looked at this tree and I saw this frass and I saw this bleeding, and it was something new to me. I was so intrigued with what I was doing and the work that I wanted to find out what this was, 'cause I wasn't familiar with it. So I called in a Cornell graduate Ralph Zingaro who studied under a plant pathologist from Cornell University, Robert Sinclair.

0:35:22: Ralph and I became good friends, and so I asked Ralph, "What's this look like to you? Can you figure out what this is? I've looked through all the books and —" He goes, "No, I can't. I'm gonna call it an oak decline disease." What did he call it? He called it oak decline disease, and that's exactly what it was. So he wrote a report and said, "This oak decline disease, I'm not familiar with what it is." And then I get a call from this Don Lewis at 321 Evergreen Drive, and about five months later he says, "Ken, the same thing is happening to the three trees up the side of my house."

0:35:54 Debra Schwartz: For those that don't know about Sudden Oak Death, why don't you give an example of actually how it transpires in the tree and how quickly they die.

0:36:04 Ken Bovero: Okay, good. So here's the misnomer, it's not really so sudden. What's happening is this disease, this battle is being fought in the vascular tissue for up to eight years. There're 21 different variations of a tree's own response mechanisms to fight this disease. It's amazing. Some trees have these natural fungistatic qualities that they can push the disease out and fight it off and build cell walls around it. The interesting thing about trees that's different than the human body is, trees compartmentalize disease within them and encapsulate it and wall it off with cell structures and cell forms, so that the disease is entrapped within the tree.

0:36:50: Where our bodies will heal, a tree compartmentalizes. So, if there's decay organisms, it will build up different cell wall structures so that this disease can't penetrate any farther through. And something like Phytophthora disease, of which there's 61 strains, is aggressive enough to work faster than the trees' response mechanisms. So, this battle can sometimes be going on for up to eight or 10 years, or it can be six months. It all depends on the surroundings of the trees, its natural response mechanisms, its genetics. There's so many different variables — how much moisture is it getting naturally, or is there a lawn close by, or is it a water mold, like the Great Potato famine of the 1800s, that was a Phytophthora disease.

0:37:42 Debra Schwartz: But it acts like a fungus.

0:37:44 Ken Bovero: It is a fungus. It's a fungal pathogen. And it's aggressive. So, rain years, like this last year, where we're seeing a whole new flush, a new push of it now in 2019, because of the rains that we got last year, they sporulated like crazy. They'd open up and release these spores —

0:38:05 Debra Schwartz: Like algae, they sporulate with water.

0:38:08 Ken Bovero: That's exactly it.

0:38:09 Debra Schwartz: But there are specific trees in this area that are vulnerable to it, and that would be the coast live oak.

0:38:16 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:38:16 Debra Schwartz: The tanbark oak.

0:38:18 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:38:18 Debra Schwartz: The black oak.

0:38:19 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:38:20 Debra Schwartz: What's the other one, the Shreve oak?

0:38:23 Ken Bovero: The Shreve oak gets it, but the most susceptible is the tan oak, which is interesting because it's not even really an oak tree.

0:38:31 Debra Schwartz: No.

0:38:32 Ken Bovero: It's a lithocarpus, it's not even in the Quercus family, a completely different species, but highly susceptible to it. Those were the first to just be devastated. And so when I saw this moving up Don Lewis's hillside, I removed these trees and we hauled the material away, not knowing any better, and chipped it.

0:38:52 Debra Schwartz: But just to be clear, you can be fighting the battle, but then there's a moment of truth, and then the battle is over and the trees appear to, when you see the first indication —

0:39:03 Ken Bovero: Exactly.

0:39:03 Debra Schwartz: There's a sudden change of color.

0:39:05 Ken Bovero: There is.

0:39:06 Debra Schwartz: I've seen trees that you look at them one day, and the next day they have a cast, a different cast to the tree.

0:39:10 Ken Bovero: They do.

0:39:10 Debra Schwartz: And then it's less than a week and they're dead.

0:39:12 Ken Bovero: I'm glad you mentioned that because the reality is that a tree is interesting in the way that it works, because it's like a battery. So, through the process of photosynthesis, the sunlight is allowing the tree to make sugars and starches, which it's pulling into its main woody limbs and trunk, and even into the buttress roots where it will store this energy.

0:39:36: You could sever all the roots of a tree and if it didn't blow over due to wind throw, it could live off itself for a long period of time, depending on what the food stores are. So, the interesting thing is, is when you see these trees declining, they've been fighting and fighting and they're giving up their food to try to fight this disease. And they can't recover fast enough through photosynthesis, so they fizzle out like a battery. And that's where you see the chlorophyll just falls out and the tree goes from this beautiful green, sometimes in three days, to this, you see this, a grayish sheen and then it's tan. So it appears to be sudden, but it takes a long time in most cases.

0:40:21 Debra Schwartz: I remember when we were talking, as we were walking through my yard, and we were looking at trees. Unlike many people in Mill Valley, I live in Blithedale Canyon, and there was a tremendous loss first of the tanbark oaks and then the coast oaks, and on our property, many. I guess it was in the '90s that we had quite a die-off, and then came the drought and all of a sudden not so many trees dead. But as you described, you were one of the very first people to bring this to public attention. Now I did some research today and there's a lot of people saying that they were the first people.

0:41:01 Ken Bovero: I have a great resource for you because it's been documented. Ray Moritz, who's a local forester and a consulting arborist, is a wealth of knowledge and information. I've known Ray for years. But Ray decided to dig deep into that subject and realized that I was the first one to find it based on his research. He did a paper and a report on it. He'd probably give you a copy of it.

0:41:31 Debra Schwartz: We'll include it with your interview.

0:41:33 Ken Bovero: Okay, good. Because he did say, "I wanna know. These people are all claiming that they're the first one to discover it." So, he did the work. And it's funny, on my way here, I was thinking, "Now, let me see where — " because my files only go back to 2002 in my database. I wanted to bring in the exact dates that I took Don Lewis's trees out and what date moving up the hill I'd see this progression. None of this information's in my database anymore.

0:42:00 Debra Schwartz: But you didn't give it a name.

0:42:02 Ken Bovero: I did not. I did not because it was an oak decline complex.

0:42:04 Debra Schwartz: There are people that say, "I'm the first to give it the name."

0:42:07 Ken Bovero: Well, in here, it says I did, but I don't remember. They said, "Well, Bovero at this time called it Sudden Oak Death." I may have, I don't really remember. In one of these articles, it says that I did and it was published a long time ago.

0:42:25 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, I've got a University of California —

0:42:30 Ken Bovero: Oh, they took a lot of claims, too. They were terrible through this process. So, Pavel Svihra, he's a PhD, he's a plant pathologist. I know these cast of characters well. I've spent a lot of time showing them what I found. And they love to take the credit 'cause they get funding, right? So I'm the little guy on the ground doing all the legwork and they get to take the credit. I went head to head with him when I found it in redwood in '95.

0:42:57 Debra Schwartz: You found this in redwood?

0:42:58 Ken Bovero: Oh yeah. I found it in redwood right up on Helens Lane of all places, when you're coming up, it's not Wildomar —

0:43:05 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, Wildomar, and then you can take a left on Helen.

0:43:08 Ken Bovero: Wildomar, that's right. Gomez is the other steep street in Mill Valley.

0:43:09 Debra Schwartz: Right.

0:43:09 Ken Bovero: It was a right on Helens and it was down about three or four houses on the left side, this redwood tree was dying. I decided that I wasn't calling the feds in because they kept stealing my thunder. So I asked Ray Moritz to be present to help me take the tissue samples. We sent the tissue samples in and they said, "It is phytophthora disease, but we don't hold the primer to be able to tell exactly which type

of phytophthora it is. And so you have to go through the UC system," which is Dave Rizzo, Susan Frankel, Matteo Garbelotto, Gary Slaughter — these people that I had already been kind of battling with because they were stealing my thunder.

0:43:51 Debra Schwartz: You've got your boxing mitts on when you say that.

0:43:53 Ken Bovero: Exactly. I'm like, "Come on, guys." They were stealing my thunder. I remember Pavel Svihra, our local UC farm advisor, he's a plant pathologist. I called him. The news was there, and I said, "Look we wanna have a conference. We wanna get together." And I said, "So Pavel, what are you seeing? What are you calling this?" "This is pseudomonas syringae." I said, "Pavel, this has none of the characteristics of pseudomonas syringae." I said, "Look, I brought the material," because he'd already made this statement. I said, "If you look into Robert Sinclair's book, this is what pseudomonas syringae looks like. Do you see anything that looks similar to this about this disease?"

0:44:30: "Well, no. Turn the other page." And I turn the other page. I go, "Yeah, and we're on another disease here now." And so he goes, "Well, we'll talk about this later, alright?" So I go, "I'd like to talk about it now. The news is here and these people wanna know what's going on, and this to me is a misdiagnosis." So then I got him on the news with me on Channel 7. I said, "You know, you need to get Pavel Svihra, the local expert from the UC system, and let's figure this out together." Because I wanted another head to head with him. So I said, "Pavel, this is my client here. She realizes that her tree is dying, and she's okay if we cut into it and take tissue samples." I said, "So what are your thoughts on what's going on here? Because I'm seeing something I've never seen before. And so, I wanna know, as a plant pathologist, what are you seeing?"

0:45:21: "Well, this looks like armillaria mellea." I said, "Armillaria mellea?" I said, "Where's the mushrooms and the mycelia and the separating of the bark?" "Well, you take an axe right here and you take these." He's Bulgarian, and he has this deep Bulgarian accent. "You take axe right here, you take tissue off sample bark and I show you." So I take this piece off and I go, "Where is it, Pavel?" I go, "I don't see the shoe string typical fungus that I'm very familiar with from oak root rot, which is called armillaria mellea."

0:45:54: He's getting frustrated [chuckles] and I don't blame him, 'cause Channel 7's there with a camera. And so I said, "Look, this is something new to me." I said, "It'd be nice if somebody could not call it something that it's not and start doing the research to figure out what it is." I said, "I have clients who have bought a beautiful house in Ross with this 6-foot diameter oak tree in their entry, and this tree's dead and they're crying." I said, "This is horrible, this is devastating." And I said, "On a micro level, people have 20 or 30 in their backyard that are dying, that are smaller trees." I said, "Somebody needs to figure out what this is." So back to Don Lewis, I watched this move up the side of his property, and the next thing you know, I see a whole bunch of trees above his house. And then the next year, Rick Misuraca of the city of Mill Valley knows I'm active in this SOD [Sudden Oak Death], seeing that I'm in the paper and I'm on the news.

0:46:54 Ken Bovero: And so he said, "Ken, I need a price. I've got 266 trees I need taken out of West Blithedale Canyon." So, I bid on a contract and got a contract for tanoaks, just by the hundreds, dead. It came up over the hill, from Evergreen Drive right down into West Blithedale Canyon, and then it just spread through Mill Valley like crazy. You can imagine that people are taking firewood or brush from one area to another, transporting it. Another really interesting fact was that a lot of the wood that was being taken by Joe Garbarino in San Rafael (Marin Resources, the dump) was going to Amador County — Jackson, California. Right over the hill is this huge biomass facility where they grind the stuff up, and my father says, "Ken, you gotta come up. My Italian friend from the Italian society has the same-looking stuff," and I said, "Have them take pictures and send it." It was the same thing. So, the disease had spread from this facility, right? The dust, and the particulate matter had spread and infected this hillside in my father's community.

0:48:04 Debra Schwartz: I did some research and it talks about how virulent they can be, the breeding.

0:48:11 Ken Bovero: Yes.

0:48:12 Debra Schwartz: Let me read this.

0:48:13 Ken Bovero: Okay.

0:48:14 Debra Schwartz: Because this gives you an idea. I think it helps explain exactly what you're talking about.

0:48:20 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

0:48:20 Debra Schwartz: [reading] "Like the measles of the plant world, it can go airborne. The pathogen quietly attacks a tree by burrowing into the leaves of the bark, microscopic pods called sporangia float across the air from an infected plant and land on a new leaf surface in a process that sounds like it could have inspired a few science fiction films. The sporangia pod opens up at the tip, it looks like a flying saucer with a little hatch that opens up. The tiny UFO releases around 20 even tinier spores which have two tails which rotate and propel the spore down to the surface of the leaf. The spore gains energy from the leaf through an attachment process that lets it penetrate the tissue. If the pathogen is near the tree trunk, its spores produce tubes that fit into tiny natural holes in the bark's surface."

0:49:17 Ken Bovero: Yep. It's amazing. It's devastating.

0:49:21 Debra Schwartz: It's the Terminator.

0:49:23 Ken Bovero: It is, it is. And in this little microscopic little unit, that you can't really see, and all this is going on.

0:49:29 Debra Schwartz: And so, you're basically, in that facility that's grinding up all of this, pollinating. Like measles, it doesn't necessarily just transmit through contact, but through the air.

0:49:45 Ken Bovero: It does. And I had another interesting situation. You know, before all of this, I brought tanoak to my grandmother's house in Paradise. I used to bring her wood all the time, so I brought her tanoak and some Eucalyptus, 'cause she burned wood, so I stacked it at the back of her place. And the next thing you know, three of her oak trees at the back of her unit are dead. When she was getting the trees removed, I said, "Look, grandma, I wanna talk to the tree guy that comes out to do it." I said, "Are you seeing fine little holes with frass and something that looks like molasses on the trunk?" He goes, "Yeah." I said, "If you grab that stuff and you smell it, does it smell like a Merlot or like a fermentation?" He says, "It sure does." So little did I know that I was responsible for spreading it to our grandmother's. Now that's such a cold climate, the disease couldn't live in that climate, so it killed it. It lasted that one season and then it didn't spread to any other part of that area. I remember going back up there looking around, like, "Oh no. Am I responsible for bringing this disease into this area now?" But it was too cold for it to live.

0:50:55 Debra Schwartz: You know, I'm a hiker, I hike all over, and I've noticed that there can be a lot of tree death on Mt. Tam, certain areas in particular, but you go out to Mt. Burdell and I don't see a lot of it.

0:51:09 Ken Bovero: No.

0:51:09 Debra Schwartz: I can see in those rolling hills of Novato, not so much.

0:51:12 Ken Bovero: Exactly. Isn't Mt. Burdell a beautiful area? Those trees are magnificent.

0:51:17 Debra Schwartz: Talk about trees, yes.

0:51:18 Ken Bovero: Some of those buckeyes that are this big, that are hundreds of years old, some of those massive oak trees or bays, even.

0:51:25 Debra Schwartz: Anybody that loves trees should hike up Mt. Burdell.

0:51:28 Ken Bovero: It's a beautiful area.

0:51:29 Debra Schwartz: And that would be because of the climate or just the general dryness?

0:51:35 Ken Bovero: Climate. Also bay laurel is a carrier. If you have a bay laurel tree growing within the drip line of your oak tree, you're 10 times more likely to get the infection.

0:51:46 Debra Schwartz: Welcome to Mill Valley.

0:51:47 Ken Bovero: Yeah, that's exactly it.

0:51:48 Debra Schwartz: Because there's a bay laurel for every oak tree.

0:51:52 Ken Bovero: Yeah, two to one. And they're all commingled. So basically, the way we're looking at is the bay is killing off the oak. And so, as an arborist, if you really wanted to protect your trees, cut down all the bay laurel, but make sure that you're not leaving trees that are infected already because then you're saying, "Well, this is gonna be our new buffer. We're gonna create room for them," and then they're already infected.

0:52:19 Debra Schwartz: The buffer goes, and then you've got nothing.

0:52:21 Ken Bovero: Then you have nothing. The interesting thing about this sporulation and the release of the spores is that the temperature range of 67 to 74 degrees is optimal, and 72 is perfect. So, these spores open up and they release in the spring. Well, that's the same time of year that there's a heavy amount of evapotranspiration. Trees are taking in all these nutrients and moisture and they're expanding in girth. If you look at oak trees, they have fissures and cracks in them for withstanding wind pressure, and they need to expand in particular areas to brace themselves, for support. Some trees will produce a crack in the bark that's three or four feet long and it's a direct avenue for spores to get into the tree. So, they're susceptible in the spring with the new tissue, even the pinkish fissures that come, that aren't this aggressive fracturing, it's the easiest place for the spores to come washing down the trunk and get into those little pockets and eat their way through into the vascular tissue.

0:53:41 Debra Schwartz: Have you ever managed to save a tree that was infected?

0:53:44 Ken Bovero: I have. And I give some credit to Pavel Svihra, he taught me something, so it all comes full circle. There was a tree in San Rafael. 50 percent of the base of the tree had an enormous canker. Hypoxylon, that black charcoal-looking fungus, was already all over the tree. And the client said, "We don't care what it costs, we wanna save this tree. We want you to do everything possible." So what we did is we made a copper solution, which was a fungicide, and we sprayed that all over the areas that were infected. Then we deep root injected into the soil a phosphorus fertilizer. Agri-Fos is basically a phosphoric acid, and I had a liquid form that I could inject in the soil. And then we drilled into the root flares and we put phosphoric acid in little bottles that a guy, Ralph Zingaro, from Bioscapes, had created. Because he was early on in the research, he was the one I first called in at Don Lewis', and then he talked to a company to start making a phosphite compound that we could inject directly into the trees. And so I told the client, I said, "Look, you're probably throwing your money away, but let's do what we can." And completely reversed the symptoms of the disease. Not a trace of it to this day.

0:55:12 Debra Schwartz: Do you do that kind of treatment regularly now?

0:55:14 Ken Bovero: Now it's a refined process. What we're doing is we have a backpack and it has an air tank and it has a one-way plug that goes in the tree, so it will only allow material in, but won't allow anything to come back out. One of the problems was that you were drilling a hole in a tree and putting a bottle on. The great thing was that Ralph Zingaro had found a paste, it's called Phyton-27, I haven't seen it for years, but it was a grafting compound with a fungicide base in it. So as soon as you pulled the bottle off, you had to put this paste on the wound.

0:55:50 Debra Schwartz: Like spackle.

0:55:51 Ken Bovero: Like spackle. And it was a grafting compound, so it'd accelerate growth. It would close up and it had a fungicide so that nothing could come in or go back out. It was an amazing product. I don't know whatever happened to it. So, the tree guys were doing injections and then they're leaving a direct wound and pulling these bottles off, and then there's a hole in the tree, and it's a perfect avenue for everything to, all the spores to wash down and get right in. So now Arborjet makes this gun that you use to drill this hole and you tap this cap in there and you push this little needle in and you push a button, and it injects this product in, and nothing's coming back out, it's all going into the vascular tissue. And for up to six months, it's traveling all the way around through the tree, killing off any of the phytophthora. So, here's a great thing that I learned from Pavel.

0:56:48: I went out to a client's house in Fairfax and I saw this whole enormous section of her tree had been chiseled open, all the bark taken off, and probably half an inch of the bark down to all this pinkish tissue, the inner bark layers, and I said, "What happened here?" I said, "This is horrible." Well, Pavel Svihra came out and he opened this up, he said. "This is a new treatment." And I said, "This is ridiculous. What is he doing? I can't believe this." I said, "I've never heard of this." I was not a believer in it. The next year, she called me back. She goes, "Ken, you've gotta come see my tree." All new callus development, all new bark tissue, not a trace of Sudden Oak Death. I've been taking care of that tree for the last 10 years, and there's not a sign of Sudden Oak Death on it.

0:57:33: So the new process is, if you catch it early, take a chisel, take off the first quarter inch of the bark, you can see the margins of the disease, there's discoloration, there's a dark brown edge of the disease, so as long as you keep tracing and tracing and you find those parameters and you make a full circle, then you've got the entire disease encapsulated in one area, and you hit it with Reliant, which used to be Agri-Fos, they changed the name. And I'll tell you, I've never seen anything work like it. It's amazing.

0:58:07 Debra Schwartz: Wow, good to know.

0:58:08 Ken Bovero: So, will the Forest Department do it on a forest? No, it's too expensive. But for homeowners, it's a great way to save their trees.

0:58:18 Debra Schwartz: Before we walk away from this subject, which is such an important one here, what haven't we talked about that we should include about the Sudden Oak Death and your experiences?

0:58:30 Ken Bovero: I feel like we covered it. Can you think of anything that we should touch on?

0:58:44 Debra Schwartz: One thing I do wonder about, because I see this around town, is when the trees are dead, but they're not taken down. How much more vulnerable are they to falling? Not everybody can afford it. It's very expensive to take trees down.

0:58:57 Ken Bovero: Yep, it is.

0:59:00 Debra Schwartz: So, what are the risks of leaving a tree that's dead up?

0:59:03 Ken Bovero: Extreme liability. Initially, the tree has some viability because it still has moisture in its stems and its trunk. The tree loses its leaves, but it's still pliable and rubbery, so to speak. What happens then is that you get secondary pathogens coming in, you have insects coming in and breaking down the cellulose of the wood and the structure. So, for the first three or four months, the tree's safer than it was with leaves on it. The next six months after that, it dries out very quickly. It becomes extremely brittle and is subject to complete root failure or branch failure. And they fall apart and break apart as you've probably seen when you're hiking. Just big sections of trees crashing down on the ground.

0:59:52 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I've seen an entire tree just go over in a minute, just like that. And not all of them even look that sick. It can happen just in a flash.

1:00:03 Ken Bovero: It can.

1:00:03 Debra Schwartz: An entire section of the tree or the whole tree.

1:00:07 Ken Bovero: Exactly. Trees, like humans, we're all so different. But imbalances are a huge problem with trees, just on a regular evaluation. The horizontal stuff is the most likely to fail, not the upright. Imagine you pick up a 25-pound weight and you hold it close to your ear, it's not so heavy. And you hold it out to your side, it exponentially increases the weight on your entire body and your arm and your shoulder. So, the leverage effect of trees is a big problem. As long as you can keep the end weight tucked in and eliminate or reduce that end weight, any tree will be safer.

1:00:53: A lot of times, what you're seeing is trees that become infected and they're still green, but the trees will fail because they've been weakened by the disease and there's already such an imbalance. A dead, standing tree from Sudden Oak Death, after the first year of it dying, then it starts to fall apart. Huge sections can fall off, and the whole tree can uproot. There's a ton of other fungi and insects that come in to finish it

off. For instance, a declining tree will produce ethylene, which is part of that fermentation, and the ethylene is —

1:01:30 Debra Schwartz: That's a hormone.

1:01:30 Ken Bovero: It is, and like a pheromone, it's an attractant to wood boring insects. "Here, we have a declining tree." So, it's sending out a signal to the wood boring insects. That's why you're seeing this frass associated with Sudden Oak Death, the ambrosia beetle comes in and it starts to eat through all the wood and lay its own fungi, vectors in its own food source as it comes in, and lays eggs in there. And then Western bark beetle and then termites and a whole host of things move in. And that's the degradation of the forest, eating everything up, a whole different life cycle.

1:02:10: So, they are more prone to failure after about a year, eight months to a year, after they die. Then the wood loses that moisture in it and loses it cellulose and starts to fail. And then it's a huge liability for a homeowner or a city or the county because you have dead trees looming over trails and streets and roads.

1:02:34 Debra Schwartz: And we have increased fire potential.

1:02:36 Ken Bovero: Increased fire, yes.

1:02:38 Debra Schwartz: Because we've got all that fuel. Nothing a fire likes more than oxygen and some fuel.

1:02:43 Ken Bovero: I know. You're not kidding.

1:02:47 Debra Schwartz: Okay, well that was very interesting.

1:02:48 Ken Bovero: Good.

1:02:48 Debra Schwartz: And congratulations on being the first person to discover Sudden Oak Death.

1:02:54 Ken Bovero: Yes, it was an interesting ride.

1:02:58 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so let's talk about some of the other ways in which you have collaborated or partnered with the county or the park systems. I know that you mentioned to me in an earlier conversation about the work you did at Muir Beach.

1:03:14 Ken Bovero: Exactly. So, I love restoration, and giving back has always been a fun part of what I do. If I see a situation that seems out of balance, I'd like to give my time or the company's time to fix it. In this case, it's a little different. I've worked with the federal government, whether it's National Park Service, GGNRA [Golden Gate National Recreation Area], Presidio Land Trust, Department of Interior, for roughly 30

years. So, I got to work on that beautiful project that they did out at Muir Beach where they restored that entire valley.

1:03:53: Because at some point, I'm not sure if it was the Banducci family that had that hundred-year lease on a piece out there or who it was, but the contour of that valley was completely changed. Somebody went in there with a tractor and just started re-contouring the land and the flow of the creek to suit their needs. So, the people in charge ended up doing 2,600 core drillings to find out exactly where the original contours were and mapped it out.

1:04:24 Debra Schwartz: That was the people in charge, you mean GGNRA?

1:04:27 Ken Bovero: GGNRA, yes. I was trying to remember the person's name. I've worked with her for years.

1:04:32 Debra Schwartz: Mia?

1:04:33 Ken Bovero: Mia also. Mia was part of that team. But the big, the heavy-hitter, I can see her face, and it will come to me because I've worked with her for years. That's terrible.

1:04:43 Debra Schwartz: It'll come to you.

1:04:44 Ken Bovero: It will come to me. So, that was an interesting project. I had a project going along the shoreline by the Golden Gate Bridge. They wanted huge, enormous 40-foot trunks, because they wanted to pin them into the creek for salmon habitat. So, they had me harvesting trees on a project in San Francisco, and then they selected six trees out in one of their properties, the Banducci Ranch in Muir Beach, to harvest 40-foot stems of Eucalyptus, retaining the root ball, so that they could use this for fish habitat. So, here I had a special truck designed and built to haul these huge pieces of trunk and root ball. The process was incredible. We brought in an excavator and I had a root hook made that pinpointed the load on a 1 inch surface on this huge piece of steel, 'cause Eucalyptus have enormous powerful roots. So, we took this 60,000 pound machine, and we'd reach in the ground and we'd start pulling like this, and then you'd feel resistance. "Boom!" And you'd pop this massive root.

1:06:04 Debra Schwartz: How big is the hook?

1:06:05 Ken Bovero: The hook is 4 feet tall and about 1 foot wide, but it has a radius edge of 1 inch, so you're taking all that pressure and loading it on this tip, so to speak. So that you're condensing all that inertia and energy. "Boom!" It would fracture these roots and you'd see the whole tree move. And then once we went all the way around the tree, then we'd take the beak, the hook, reach up as far as we could, and we'd push it over. And then it was pickaxes, and guys for hours taking pickaxes, cleaning all of the dirt. They did not want dirt coming from other areas to come to the site. Then that it was pressure washing and they had to be certified by them that they were clean enough to

then move across the Golden Gate Bridge on this truck I had built and brought out to Muir Beach. And so when I went out to the site, I looked and I got upset. I go, "What did you do with all the trunk? Why'd you just put the root ball in?" They go, "No. We had this enormous machine take that 40 foot of enormous trunk and pin it into the soil. Because all you saw sticking out of the ground was the root ball." And it was amazing that some of the trunks at the end, I'll call it the fine end, were 3 feet in diameter, that they just pushed with some massive piece of equipment. So, in a 200 year storm, they're not gonna wash away, they're pinned way down into the soil.

1:07:37 Debra Schwartz: It's like one of those titanium tooth implants. [laughs]

1:07:41 Ken Bovero: You're not kidding. It was. What they did out there, they grew native grasses in their greenhouses from seed stock that they had taken six years before. They shook all the seeds out of native bushes and shrubs within a 2-mile radius, so that they had the same genus, what was there, 200, 300, 400 years ago. It's amazing to be part of projects like that. I love it. I go back and I go, "Wow. Look at what was here and what's here now."

1:08:11: The fish restoration project turned out really well. The red-legged frog ponds have outstanding numbers. They know better what those numbers are, but I remember them sharing the numbers with me, and they were staggering. Another one was an interesting one over Langdon Court, well this isn't Mill Valley, but the project we work with, it was called "Valley of the Serpents." It was a really heavy, real steep terrain, and we cleared hundreds of trees off, because they used to back up the dump trucks in the '50s and '60s, and they'd take all the lead-based paints and stuff that they take off the buildings and siding, and they dumped them over the side towards the ocean. So they had to re-contour a lot of this earth to get it back. There was lead on the beaches, and so they had to clean all of this material up.

1:09:02 Debra Schwartz: Where is this?

1:09:02 Ken Bovero: This was all along the shoreline on Lincoln. If you hit the Golden Gate Bridge, you make the first right hand turn and you're on that steep shoreline, they re-contoured a whole bunch of that. They would take areas that had terrible soil that was contaminated, back it up over the edge and just dump them. This is in the '50s and '60s, maybe even '40s, I don't know the timelines, they do. But I remember on one of the sites, we had to take out all of the Monterey pine that were down there, some Eucalyptus and some Monterey cypress. They did the re-contour work, they were getting ready to replant, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, comes all of this habitat that they didn't even know the seed stock was in the ground. Things that they weren't familiar with to ever grow in that area. And now I walk through it and the stuff is this tall.

1:09:56 Debra Schwartz: You're holding your hands up to be about five and a half feet.

1:10:00 Ken Bovero: Yeah, about five and a half feet tall. It's incredible. It's called "Valley of the Serpents," this area. And to see what naturally came back in was amazing. So that was a fun one, 'cause they were planning on replanting and then they started seeing all of this stuff coming up.

1:10:17 Debra Schwartz: Not necessary.

1:10:18 Ken Bovero: No. So that was a fun project to be part of.

1:10:22 Debra Schwartz: How does it feel when you go to a place like on Lincoln on those cliffs or into Muir Beach to know that you played a part of?

1:10:32 Ken Bovero: I feel blessed. I feel like, "Wow. This is my backyard and I get to give back, I get to do my part." Sometimes I forget about all that I do, and I'll sit there and I'll go, "Wow. Remember 25 years ago when we worked on this restoration site, or we cleared this area." And there're so many. I was talking to one of my employees yesterday, I was helping them on a project and we started to recall a whole bunch of projects we worked on. And it's incredible. It's a great feeling.

1:11:09 Debra Schwartz: What is an arborist's nightmare? You work in an area where there's all kinds of people that have a lot of ideas of how they want things to be, and maybe they're not used to negotiating with Mother Nature.

1:11:23 Ken Bovero: Or neighbors. [chuckles]

1:11:24 Debra Schwartz: Or neighbors. What's an arborist's nightmare?

1:11:27 Ken Bovero: Oh man, Tiburon. There's a reason there're three tree attorneys in Marin and that's all they do. I met with a client last week, who's in a legal dispute, and it just tasted bad from the minute I got out of the car. Right away I could just feel, "Oh, this is another legal situation. Please, no." So, our energy didn't jive real well. I think we were both aware of that, but she had a mission and she was butting heads with her neighbor and they both had attorneys. And to me, I feel like there's always a way to work something out, hopefully, but it's such a litigious community that we're in. It's so different than how it used to be, and that is very frustrating to me, and it gets very frustrating to my guys, 'cause then attorneys are coming over and they're telling the men to take three more inches off, but we've taken it to the height that was already agreed upon by the plastic pole that was made for 23 feet at this piece, where the stake is. And so then it halts the whole crew, then the attorneys are driving over, and it just gets so frustrating. And to see these people spend $150,000 a piece on legal fees when it's $3,000 worth of trimming, they could've split it or one could've said, "You know what? I benefit from the view, so I'll pay for it." So that, to me, gets really frustrating.

1:13:00 Debra Schwartz: I remember a situation in my own street where a neighbor cut another neighbor's tree to improve the view.

1:13:07 Ken Bovero: Yes.

1:13:08 Debra Schwartz: And the people whose tree had been cut weren't too happy about it.

1:13:12 Ken Bovero: Yes.

1:13:12 Debra Schwartz: You spoke to the person who had the tree cut and you advised, "Listen, lady, you did this, so you can improve your view."

1:13:25 Ken Bovero: Yes.

1:13:26 Debra Schwartz: **"**You essentially, sawed the top off the trees."

1:13:29 Ken Bovero: Yep.

1:13:29 Debra Schwartz: **"**Very soon, you're going to have basically a hedge."

1:13:32 Ken Bovero: Exactly.

1:13:33 Debra Schwartz: **"**And if you'd like to keep your view, I recommend that you find a way to work something out."

1:13:40 Ken Bovero: Yeah.

1:13:40 Debra Schwartz: You did cut their trees.

1:13:42 Ken Bovero: Yeah. And there comes lawsuits. I mean there're lawsuits that have occurred from this. So somebody thinks that it's okay to go saw the top of somebody's tree off. But there're ratios that we have to follow set by the International Society of Arboriculture, one of which says never cut more than 20 percent of the green foliage off a tree at any given time or it can be harmful to it, because of that photosynthesis process that we talked about in food stores. Now that number used to be 30 percent and has recently changed to 20, which I agree with, but there's instances where people have bay laurel trees that are obliterating their view, and I inform them, "Look, this is a bay laurel. It's a paraphyletic tree. It's not a high valued tree. So, if it was me and it would improve my quality of life, I would do the reduction. The tree's gonna sprout back." I've even seen in situations where we've had to deal with oak trees where we're cutting them to stubs on a legal request and they do come back. So, the reality is it changes the overall structure and it changes the intrinsic beauty of a natural plant structure or a tree, but in some cases I see where it's warranted and where it's needed. As long as you're informing the person that owns the tree, and then it's their educated decision to make the best decision that's right for them.

1:15:11 Debra Schwartz: How about now? We've got some changes going on in our community because of the increased fire risk with climate change and also the fuel load,

which is steadily built up, and people are being advised to remove the lower branches and to remove trees, flammable trees, such as the Italian cypress. The —

1:15:35 Ken Bovero: Juniper.

1:15:35 Debra Schwartz: The juniper. The bamboo.

1:15:38 Ken Bovero: Yes.

1:15:39 Debra Schwartz: And the acacia.

1:15:40 Ken Bovero: Yeah. I think that you look at each one situationally. I think it tends to be such a broad brushstroke, and I feel like it's a case-by-case situation. You know, this whole "nothing within three feet of the house" to me doesn't seem to be fair or right, even though it's a highly combustible area. If you have that already, it's great, but if you have beautiful specimen Japanese maples or beautiful specimen black pines or oak trees that have been in there and you cut all this down and your value of your house is $300,000 less, I think that there should be some type of release form that says, "Look, if you wanna make the house more susceptible to fire and you wanna keep this stuff, then you can sign off here and we'll leave you alone."

1:16:29 Debra Schwartz: But then, you know, I've interviewed firemen, and you can listen to these interviews about how the science of fire control is changing.

1:16:39 Ken Bovero: Yes.

1:16:40 Debra Schwartz: That fires themselves are changing with the changing climate and the ability to fight fire as they had in the past has changed. So now it's a lot more threatening.

1:16:51 Ken Bovero: I get it.

1:16:52 Debra Schwartz: So, I have a feeling that it will be an ongoing discussion.

1:16:56 Ken Bovero: I do, too. Did you make it to the meeting that they had a month ago, Thursday? Everybody in the community came out, and I mean it sounded like it was a big battle to me.

1:17:07 Debra Schwartz: It's an inflammatory subject.

1:17:09 Ken Bovero: Very much so.

1:17:10 Debra Schwartz: No pun intended.

1:17:11 Ken Bovero: So, I myself in Oregon, I planted a lot of stuff close to my house. Barberry is not such flammable stuff, but it is stuff close to my house, and I love the way

it looks. Granted, I have a big green lawn also, all the way around my house, so I have a nice buffer and I have a concrete roof. So, I feel like I'm pretty well-protected. But you look at some of these videos of this fire situations where the rosemary is growing right up near the side of the house and there's a whole bunch of duff from it that's carrying oils and it's very dry. They're realizing that it's not so much that shake roof that you had, that the shake was this thick, it's the little fine stuff around the edges that starts the other stuff burning right up the side, and then once it hits the eaves and it starts to burn inside, then the vents on the bottom start to become an avenue. They have to suck oxygen in to feed the fire and then embers are pulling in through the vents. I mean, the fire science that they've learned over these past couple of years is amazing.

1:18:21 Debra Schwartz: Right.

1:18:21 Ken Bovero: What a huge benefit.

1:18:24 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about the arborist's dream.

1:18:29 Ken Bovero: It's different for every one of them. Here's a phrase I learned years ago. I'm a big Tonka toy kid, so I love sitting on an excavator, working on a restoration site, a clearing site. So, they're taking out 6 foot diameter Eucalyptus trees, and you have a 60,000 pound machine, and you have logging trucks, and 1,200 horsepower wood chippers that chip material, this big for 20 feet in length. That to me is exhilarating. So, you have oak men and you have Euc men. And I'm more a Euc man, where Louie that worked with me for 25 years, he's definitely an oak man. He'd love to be sculpting the interior of an oak, where I'm a little big and it's hard for me to get around in a little oak tree. [chuckles] So that varies. But I did have a huge conflict. *Avatar* is one of my favorite films, and when I watched *Avatar* I was in the middle of a restoration site. We were clearing all of the Monterey pine and Eucalyptus in the Presidio. And when I saw that big tractor coming down to take out Mother Tree, I sobbed, because I was in such conflict with myself, because really, I have to be careful, I get emotional about it.

1:19:55 Debra Schwartz: That's okay.

1:19:57 Ken Bovero: I can relate with both sides, but more so with that whole Mother Tree side, about the power, the beauty of plant life and life itself. I like everybody to bring everybody up, to build each other up, so that we're all at a higher level, and so that was such a struggle for me.

1:20:22 Debra Schwartz: I remember talking to your daughter, McKenzie, who works in your office, and she told me that you had read *The Hidden Life of Trees* and that it had pressed you into a moral dilemma.

1:20:34 Ken Bovero: It did. Because one side of me is the guy who wants to save the forest and save the trees, but yet the playful boy in me wants to go wreck things and break things up. [chuckles] So, it's an internal struggle, but I'm finding that the *Avatar*

side of me is winning more of these battles, so I'm less inclined to wanna do larger projects even though it's been such a big part of what we've done for 30 of the 40 years of business.

1:21:07 Debra Schwartz: Does it mean that it changes the way that you get work? I mean, do you go to people's houses and say, "I don't wanna cut that tree down"?

1:21:18 Ken Bovero: I do. And I'm glad you asked that because there's certain trees, redwoods and oak trees, and I just won't do it. I look at the tree and I think, "What a beautiful specimen." They want an add-on to their house, and I'm like, "You bought these trees as part of this property, and these trees have been here longer than this house ever has been. So you know what, if you wanted to add-on, you should have bought something that was bigger or had more of what you wanted." So, that's a struggle for me. I like to be very upfront.

1:21:53: I had a client yesterday — no, excuse me, it was last Thursday before I left — and she wanted to cut down her oak tree. And I said, "Well, why do you wanna take this beautiful tree down"? "Well, it drops all these leaves." And I said, "Drops all these leaves? It's blocking you from all the sun. Look at the shade you get from it. Look at the beauty of this tree." She says, "Well, one of the other tree guys said it had a root fungus." I said, "Will you show me where he saw the root fungus?" she says, "Well, all of this stuff growing on the ground out here." I go, "These are lichens, native lichens." I said, "This guy's crazy," and it's a guy that I taught the tree business to. I said, "You tell him I told you that he's completely wrong. And here's what I recommend you do. I want you to call this individual consultant, you've got two conflicting people that are arborists that are telling you two different things, call in this neutral party and see what they say." But it was just terrible. I run into it all the time. There was one earlier today, as a matter of fact, it was six redwood trees in Tiburon. I was called to look at a project in the backyard for some pruning they wanted to do, and I saw that they were cutting this pathway to the house, and they were cutting redwood roots like this.

1:23:10 Debra Schwartz: You're holding your hands up and you're giving me a circle, and it's about —

1:23:13 Ken Bovero: Four inches in diameter.

1:23:14 Debra Schwartz: Four, yes.

1:23:15 Ken Bovero: Just five feet from the base of these beautiful heritage trees. And so I sent him a letter, 'cause I have an obligation, I'm out there. I said, "Look, when I was out, I noticed that you're cutting the roots of these trees. You're gonna cause these trees to go into decline. This is a life support system and they're feeding mechanism for the trees." So I get a call today, and it's the same place, and here we are, a year and a half later, the house is all reconstructed. It looks beautiful. They put their $3 million into it, and their trees are dying.

1:23:44: I said, “Do you remember the letter that I sent you?” “Well, yeah, but we didn’t know how severe it was.” I said, “I explained that you were killing your trees. I don’t know if I could have been more clear about it.” So now he says, “Well, the other arborist said, ‘We have to cut them all down.’” And I said, “If you wanna cut them all down, that’s up to you, but you do not have to.” I said, “We need to bring in some fertilizer, some very slow-release fertilizers, some sea kelp that we’ll inject into the soil to help the roots recover. You need to start watering. This was a lawn that was here before.” I said, “Now the trees are getting zero water, when they used to get water once a day, every day.” I said, “So you need to start putting a soaker hose today here. Over here.” I had flags in my car, and I put six different flags down. I said, “The hose needs to run at a fairly high trickle in each one of these spots for six hours to get a nice deep saturation into the root zone.” So, it was horrible. Just a little bit of precaution could have saved these beautiful four-foot diameter redwood trees. The little ones were 3 feet, the big ones were 4.5 feet in diameter. And the whole tops were dead. Just terrible.

1:24:58 Debra Schwartz: Do you ever feel that you’re guided by the trees that you’re around?

1:25:02 Ken Bovero: No question. I’m an empathetic person. It’s tough, ’cause I feel other people’s pain a lot of times. And so I go into a situation, and I’ll look, and I don’t understand their concept or what they’re trying to do, and I fight and I fight. I say, “Look, I wouldn’t do it and if this is what you wanna do, I’m not the person to do it for you, I just don’t feel this is right to do.” It almost cost me one of my big government contracts once. It was at Tennessee Valley Beach, and there was this big beautiful Eucalyptus tree, just the incredible specimen about four or eight feet in diameter and these big three-foot diameter limbs. And Sharon Farrell, that was who I was trying to think of who was running that big project out there at Redwood Creek at Muir Beach. Sharon was there, and Sharon and I had worked together for years, I go, “Sharon, do you realize what this tree is?” She goes, “That’s a non-native species.” I go, “Yeah, but Indians were probably cracking acorns underneath this tree and opening shellfish.” I go, “This is one of the grandfather trees of Tam Valley.”

1:26:20 Debra Schwartz: But weren’t those trees brought in, Eucalyptus, usually by the military?

1:26:24 Ken Bovero: They were, but I don’t know, this was beautiful, one of the most stunning Eucalyptus trees I’d ever seen. And I said, “I get all these little off-shoots and all these, but what’s the chance? What if I write an arborist report and we just say that this is a specimen for this type of tree, and if you guys monitor and make sure it doesn’t — ” She goes, “Ken, it’s a non-native tree. We’re clearing out all these non-natives, it’s part of our long-term plan.” I’m like, “Sharon, you gotta take a stand for this. Look at this.” She goes, “Ken, do you wanna be part of the project or not?” And I’m like, “Oh, that one hurt.” So I said, “Alright, Sharon, I don’t agree with that.” And then someone else got the job. I didn’t get that project ’cause I didn’t really want it and I bid it kinda high. It didn’t feel right to me. And the contractor ended up blowing his machine, blew a big hose, and he was making derogatory comments towards some of the staff. And the staff reported

him to the EPA, it got really ugly. So that tree was trying to take a fight for itself and stand for itself. So, I will frequently take a stand for trees.

1:27:37 Debra Schwartz: How about a good tall tree tale? Ever seen anything unusual, something special, something really unusual?

1:27:47 Ken Bovero: Yeah, let me see. The first thing that comes to my mind is when I was in Tiburon, when I was climbing roughly 30 years ago. I was at Hacienda Drive in Tiburon, and I'm in the stand of Monterey cypress, and I hear this hissing in my ear. And I look over and there's a bat on my shoulder, [chuckles] hissing in my eyeball. I look over and it's right here. And I freaked out. I hit myself so hard on my shoulder that my spikes came out of the tree, so I'm hanging from my core rope. And I smashed the poor bat on my shoulder. It's mangled on the ground. I freaked out. I had to come out of the tree. In my mind, it was a vampire, right? Dracula. It was so crazy to me. And then I remember another really scary situation that happened where my friend and I, Craig Peterson, we were doing these trees across the street from my mother's house, big Eucalyptus trees. And he wanted them out of there, so we were taking them out and we decided to race each other to the top of the tree. So we're running up the tree with our core ropes, we're running up, we're running up. And he says, "Hey!" And I go like this, I'm 2 inches from going over the top of the tree and falling to death, unfortunately, onto a pile of logs.

1:29:15 Debra Schwartz: Oh no!

1:29:16 Ken Bovero: My knees collapsed and I sat there just like dazed and confused. I couldn't climb for five days. I was so freaked out. And it haunts me to this day; I still have nightmares about it. If I threw my rope up a little bit harder, I would have been down on the wood pile, 90 feet below me. It was scary. That was the biggest fear, and I was like, "Always stay humble, right?" Always be cognitive, always be alert of your surroundings. 'Cause I was that close to going over the top, when I went like this and my knees just buckled. So, it was scary. That was a really intense moment.

1:30:01: The tree business is so interesting 'cause you've got tree guys and trucks and equipment, and I remember one time when this person wanted the wood chips from one of our projects, so my guy backs our huge dump truck all the way up the driveway and he starts to dump the truck, not realizing that he's at unlevel ground. And as the bed's coming up, the truck's starting to fall down the hill, and it tumbled down her front yard and into the street in Tam Valley. That was not fun. It's not fun. So unfortunately, things happen in the tree business, they always have, they always will. Guys forget to set a brake on something and it's rolling off with the chipper on it. They happen to everybody. You could say, "Oh no, it's not gonna happen to me or it doesn't happen to me," but it happens to everybody.

1:31:00 Debra Schwartz: Well, you are a robust individual. How long do you think you're going to be able to keep it up?

1:31:09 Ken Bovero: That's a good question, 'cause I'm 58 and I still feel like I got this 'til I'm 75. So, we'll see what happens. Time will tell. Genetics have been good to me so far and I take good care of myself, so we'll see. Unfortunately, my grandfather, my mother's father, passed way at 58, the age I am now, so I decided to get my cholesterol level checked, and it was high, my blood pressure has been high, so I've made some life adjustments. And so far, in my blood work, it looks like I'm doing a much better job.

1:31:42 Debra Schwartz: You can save yourself from a heart attack and fall off a tree instead.

1:31:46 Ken Bovero: Exactly. And I've had 32 motorcycles over the years and ridden like a maniac, and I'm still here. So I feel like every day is a blessing. All the tree climbing I did and all the heavy equipment stuff and falling huge massive trees at Dominican. It's been an interesting life, and I have enjoyed it the whole way through.

1:32:08 Debra Schwartz: Is there anybody that you'd like to mention, if you haven't mentioned already, somebody that's been an inspiration, or family members, before we close?

1:32:21 Ken Bovero: The one person I could think of is my grandfather. Even though I never got to know him really well, I feel like there's a big part of him that lives in me and I feel like I got a good business sense from him. My father's been, he's a fairly conservative person, but has been a great voice of reason for me along the way. And then I have friends, like my friend, Rick Misuraca that was the city arborist here for years, who's just a very emotionally-balanced person. Michael Hinkeys at Dominican University that I worked with for 30 years — just people that I've looked up to over my life who've helped me create more balance. Even like Vasilios Choulos, those garden talks with him and seeing a different way of life. I feel like we're here to learn and every day is an opportunity to learn something new. And so, I try to keep everything open, so that I can take in what I can. I love to share my knowledge for those people that will take it. I love to tell stories, and I love to tell stories about life, and I love restoring old cars and hot rods and stuff. That's a passion of mine. So I try to be an inspiration to others as well in my actions and in my God-given, genetically given, optimistic attitude. For some reason, I've been blessed to have a lot of energy. So hopefully, my battery doesn't run out early.

1:34:04 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. [laughs] No SOD for you.

1:34:07 Ken Bovero: Exactly, no SOD. If so, a couple of treatments and we'll turn it around, we'll chisel it out and we'll keep going.

1:34:15 Debra Schwartz: One word of advice to young arborists?

1:34:19 Ken Bovero: Be safe, hone your craft and your skill set, always learn as much as you can, and keep your eyes open so that you can better yourself and your trade.

1:34:36 Debra Schwartz: Okay, I think we got it.

1:34:38 Ken Bovero: Great.

1:34:39 Debra Schwartz: Thank you so much —

1:34:40 Ken Bovero: You're very welcome.

1:34:41 Debra Schwartz: For coming here today on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Library. I believe that concludes your interview.

1:34:48 Ken Bovero: Great. Good to see you.

1:34:49 Debra Schwartz: Good to see you, too.