

Frank Dietz column January 2025

When One Person Steps Forward, What a Difference!

Through the decades there have been numerous persons who stepped forward with a passion to make a difference in the challenging world and society we live in. The underlying roadmap reflects a series of motivating questions: "Should I?" "Could I?" "Would I?" And, finally with resolve: "YES, I WILL!" These steps are clearly reflected in the inspirational telling of her tale of success by Leslie Collier, the 2024 recipient of the Jensei Madden Award for conservation leadership and exemplary courage of conviction. The award was presented publicly on October 26th in a festive event in Gruene and subsequently recognized with a timely resolution by the Comal County Commissioners.

On a crisp, clear afternoon, it was a privilege to sit with Leslie on their spacious deck out above the "Sentinel Peak" and Devil's Backbone. We were at a perfect perch to see the lookout along Highway 32 between Purgatory Road and the recently built Canyon Lake High School campus. Amidst this rugged terrain while husband Brian harvested their first honey from their bees, Leslie explained her deep roots and affection for El Rancho Cima, the historic Boy Scout Camp of twenty-eight hundred acres. Among the thousands of youngsters and adult mentors, Leslie's late father had been a frequent visitor and leader in numerous Scouting capacities. Many times, the family accompanied him.

El Rancho Cima and its first programming dates back to 1953. This was when the Sam Houston Council of BSA acquired and launched use of the land for scouting in the greater Houston region. That led to thousands of reports by achievers of their "survival solo merit badges" and a rich myriad of other outdoor and river recreational skills and adventures. My own sons did their "on their own" 24-hour survivals on that rugged turf. The retelling of camp tales would take several volumes, no doubt. Suffice to say here that when unfortunate necessity required that the BSA liquidate many such properties it meant a realtor's large sign went up at the Sentinel Peak fence line. When Leslie looked out and saw the activity for the public listing, "it was like lightening struck." Though never aspiring to public speaking or bold big bucks' askings, Leslie enlisted Brian for support. Her fevered networking effort and search for the \$24.5 million asking price in 2017 spread rapidly. Her first five good friends took her high fevered case, reached another five or more and how word spread. Well-meaning donations began to roll in but modestly. These enabled a campaign to be sustained and key folk enlisted. With 200 of the 2800 acres of El Rancho Cima located on the Hays County side of the Blanco River, Hays folks got instantly to work, utilizing "mitigation funds" and achieving a match from the Nature Conservancy to address that parcel. On the Comal side private "set asides" for yellow cheeked warblers have been secured outside the county. Thus, private efforts ensued, conservation minded investors for large sections were successfully reached and the final two of six ranch portions by the peak have closed.

What a difference someone can make! Leslie proved to be an excellent and persuasive speaker and a willing outreaching requester of funders. When the scouters "decommissioned" the "sacred ground" over a thousand gathered from far and wide. El Rancho Cima lives in memories and legacy futures.

Thank you, Leslie Collier for stepping forward and making a difference! As the song says, "it only takes a spark to get a fire burning!" Indeed!