

Marin Independent Journal

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Breaking down barriers

Conservation corps leader aims to bring nature to minority and city youth

By Mark Prado
IJ reporter

DEBORAH SCHOENBAUM has often attended an environmental event and has found herself the only face of color among hundreds of people.

She wants to change that.

"One of the things I have worked hard at is breaking down the barriers on how people see conservation, the stereotype of how conservationists are supposed to look," says the affable Schoenbaum in her office in the heart of the Canal district in San Rafael. "At a Land Trust event in Sacramento, I went to a reception the first day before the conference started. There were 800 to 1,000 people there, and I was the only African American there. That has happened to me more times than I can count throughout my experience. It's very, very tough, but I also feel like I have the responsibility to say 'Hey, there are different perspectives that can be brought to the table.'"

As the new deputy director of the Marin Conservation Corps, which helps restore public lands and provides education services, she is getting that chance, reaching young people, as well as minority and underprivileged youths, and making an impression on them about the importance of the environment.

Getting youths to see life outside their own communities is critical, she says.

"The kids' lives are at risk. When I say that, that's not overemphasizing it," she says, seriously. "The second week I was here we had a corps members shot in Richmond and

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PROFILES

DEBORAH SCHOENBAUM

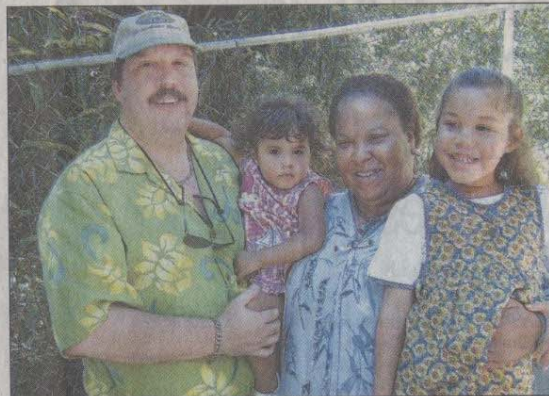
► **AGE:** 49

► **HOMETOWN:**
Novato

► **OCCUPATION:**
Marin Conservation Corps
deputy director



IJ photo/Robert Tong



SPREADING THE WORD:

Deborah Schoenbaum hopes to inspire minorities to get involved in improving the environment. In photo at left, Schoenbaum spends time with her family, husband Mark, and daughters Sarah, 3 and Elizabeth, 7.

Provided by
Deborah Schoenbaum

See Schoenbaum, page D6

SCHOENBAUM: Kids involved with nature

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three weeks later there was another one shot.”

Both died.

“It’s first time we have lost corps members in the program,” says Schoenbaum, who took over the job in October.

Schoenbaum, 49, says there is a desperate need to get city youths — especially the poor — out of their environments, away from the gang pressures, the cement and the gloom that can permeate their lives.

“I had the nature experience as a child,” says Schoenbaum, who grew up in San Francisco and went to Mercy High School, attended City College of San Francisco and received a business degree from San Francisco State University. “My parents were both from rural Louisiana, and they grew up in farmlands. We went camping when I was a child, we went to Tahoe, we had a house at Lake Berryessa. I had those things and lot of kids didn’t.”

Her mother, a nurse at San Francisco General Hospital for 42 years, inspired a service ethic in Schoenbaum.

Getting children to experience nature and the environment is critical, she says.

“I believe that if you don’t get exposure to it, you not only lose something in your life, but you also become tied to an environment that is very limited,” Schoenbaum says. “That can be stifling for them and their ability to think they can achieve more, and that they can move past circumstances that are not ideal.

“Once you can get kids outside that box, you can open up a whole world for them, and I have seen that. That drives me. I see it with kids here all the time.”

It took a while for Schoenbaum to find her way back to nature after her childhood experiences.

“I had the environment bug, but I initially decided to go into business,” she says.

After college she took a job at Providian Financial Corp. as a credit analyst, working on a wel-



Provided by Deborah Schoenbaum

GOOD WORK: Last summer when Deborah Schoenbaum worked for the Trust for Public Land, she gave San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom a framed photo of a renovated park at Bayview-Hunter’s Point.

fare-to-work program. It turned out the Nature Conservancy — a group that protect species and lands — was in the same building as Providian and she contemplated a job there.

“I had long talk with my husband and decided that I really wanted to do something different with my life,” she says. “I was close to 40 and I had always cared about the environment and I always wanted to environmental work. I knew it would be a substantial cut in pay and benefits. I was getting stock options and bonuses and everything else while I was at Providian.”

Schoenbaum has been married to husband Mark, who is in banking, for 17 years. He had no qualms about his wife’s green career shift.

“My husband says ‘Go for it,’” she says. “He always has been extremely supportive; he has been my cheerleader.”

She was hired by the Nature Conservancy and worked on out-

reach to the Latino and African-American communities to build support for bond measures that provided money for the environment. She also reworked the conservancy’s Web site to translate it into other languages.

Her work there lead to a job at the Trust for Public Land, where she took on the role of director of Bay Area Urban Programs.

“It was an absolute incredible dream job,” she says. “It involved running a program that re-did community parks and playgrounds programs in low-income neighborhoods in the Bay Area.”

Tim Wirth, who worked with her at the Trust for Public Land, says he was impressed by Schoenbaum’s demeanor and her work.

“She’s has a wonderful warm personality, a great laugh and was a lot of fun too work with,” Wirth says. “She is a champion advocate for the environment as well as social justice, and realizes the two are not mutually exclusive.”



Special to the IJ/Darcy Holdorf

MUDDY JOB: Deborah Schoenbaum, deputy director of the Marin Conservation Corps, helps daughter Sarah search for the invasive Japanese mud snail at Loch Lomond Marina last month.

During her time at the Trust for Public Land, the Schoenbaums — then living in San Francisco — decided to adopt two children. The adoption of Sarah, 3, and Elizabeth, 7, was completed in January.

“We needed a larger house. We had a lot of friends who lived here in Marin. We found a beautiful house in Novato about four years ago,” she says.

Initially, Schoenbaum commuted to the city with her husband and children, but she wanted her kids be able to go to school locally and built friendships in Marin.

She applied for the post at the Marin Conservation Corps and was hired.

“This has been wonderful,” she says. “The wealth of programs that we have here is so perfect for what my ethic is, in terms of the environment and also the population we work with.”

In addition to directing programs at the corps, Schoenbaum is also very hands-on. She can be found kneeling in mud picking out invasive snails in San Rafael near the bay or pulling exotic weeds near Mount Tamalpais.

“I make an effort to get out there and spend time with the corps members and get to know them,” she says. “They take a lot of pride in what they do. They

go back and visit the sites with their families. The connection is being made.”

And opening the world of nature to minority youth is what pushes Schoenbaum.

“It drives me, it really does, in many different ways. It drives me from my own personal experience and it also drives me because of my kids, who are half African American and half Latino. I want them to know there is this whole world out there. That’s why I bring Sarah on the projects because I want them to have that exposure,” she says.

Marilee Eckert, executive director of the conservation corps, says Schoenbaum leads by example.

“She really is a great model for the corps members,” she says.

“She’s really interested in their development and really looks to their futures. She wants them to develop in a way so they can develop the best way possible.”

Schoenbaum likes to speak about her experiences in hopes it will inspire minorities to get involved in the environment.

“I got an e-mail from a young woman after I spoke at the Bay Area Open Space Council, saying ‘It was so inspiring not only to hear you speak, but to know there is another African American that has been doing this for

awhile. I don’t see people of color involved in this.”

When not working in nature, Schoenbaum finds herself in it, soaking up its wonders. Hiking and camping are interests, as are swimming and reading. “I read anything I can get my hands on,” she says.

Schoenbaum participated in musical theater while in college, and loves to sing and plays piano and guitar. Her husband just bought her an acoustic Martin.

“A typical night at our home after dinner is both of us picking up our guitars and the kids picking up maracas and a tambourine and playing in the house. We have a little mini band,” she says.

She is proud of her family and of Marin and her work with the corps.

“We make the county a better place, we help keep it green, we keep it the vital place that it is,” she says. “We are losing so much open space, and the pressures of development are so huge. I want to leave a legacy for my kids. I don’t want them to grow up in a concrete world.”

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