

# Gloria Schlaepfer is a 'Natural' Volunteer

As an environmentalist, naturalist, author and avid volunteer, Gloria Schlaepfer began her life's journey in Livingston, a small, rural town in New Jersey. As a child, she often ventured into the nearby woods to enjoy the natural surroundings. One day while there, she came across a nest where she saw a mother bird feeding her young.



"I don't know what prompted me to do it but I ended up helping the mother bird feed the babies," Gloria remembers. "That was my earliest recollection of understanding the importance of nature, the environment and the important role animals play in our world. I lived near this wonderful area and just connected with nature."

After high school in the 1950s, Gloria earned a bachelor's degree in bacteriology and zoology and a master's degree in environmental studies 30 years later.

For a few years, she worked as a diagnostic lab technician in Miami, Florida while her husband attended medical residency. But it was not until the couple moved to Southern California in the early 1960s did she find her true passion - volunteering, an avocation that she has enjoyed for the past 60 years.

"I first started volunteering for the American Association of University Women, Fullerton Branch," Gloria said. "From there I volunteered for various environmental groups associated with the AAUW. I am very proud of all the time and energy I gave to them. I learned as much as I gave."

Her career as a volunteer was vast, including work for the March of Dimes, Fullerton elementary schools, the Fullerton Arboretum, Tree Society of Orange County, Morningside Presbyterian Church, Girl Scouts of America, The Art Alliance of Cal State Fullerton, City of Fullerton, County of Orange and many others. She made a significant impact to many of the groups and organizations she touched and received numerous honors, awards and accolades for her work.

"In the 1970s, one of the committees I chaired, studied the environment and eventually produced a program designed to recycle newspaper citywide," Gloria said. "We convinced the Fullerton City Council and the trash hauler to implement it. That was the first step to source separation that we have now."

Although passionate about her work, Gloria is just as passionate about her family. “My husband and I raised four children, and it was important to us that we sat down for dinner together each night. My kids had music lessons and actively participated in sports, so I made sure to attend their games. I was a very busy person, but I always found time for my family,” she said.

In the 1980s she decided she wanted to increase her knowledge of the environment and conservation, so she pursued her master’s degree part time so she could still maintain a strong family life.

“I looked for some way to use my degree and formed a partnership with Mary Lou Samuelson, who was a teacher with an interest in nature,” Gloria said. “We wrote together and submitted our work to many children book publishers and, of course, got many rejections. One day, an editor wrote he wasn’t interested in what we had written, but would we be interested in us writing about the endangered African Rhinos. And that began our career in writing non-fiction for children. Later, when Mary Lou and I parted because of her family obligations, I continued to write alone and published five more books.”

She also authored several papers on recycling, transportation’s impact on the environment, and an oral history of land conservation for the Coachella Valley, as well as an oral history of artist Florence Arnold.

Now living at Walnut Village for the past six years, Gloria maintains contact with her kids and grandkids who live out-of-the area. She also volunteers with the community’s Scholarship and Nominating committees.

“Because of health issues, I’m not as active as I once had been, but I still love tending my garden of potted geraniums and succulents,” Gloria said. “I play bridge with friends, read, am grateful for the gym, walk, and enjoy having dinner with other residents in The Grove dining room. My next ‘volunteer’ project will be working on biographies of family members and updating all my photographs — a big job!”