



by Alessandra Beramin

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The third annual San Francisco Green Festival launches on Thursday, and amongst the 50 films from around the globe covering topics as wide-ranging as green chemistry to clean energy is with a documentary that hits home. The Opening Night Premiere is *Rebels with a Cause*, a 74-minute piece that tells the story of how the Marin coastline was saved from rampant suburban development by an impassioned group who helped found the Point Reyes National Seashore and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. It's rare that we stop and think how these open spaces came to be, but filmmakers Nancy Kelly and Kenji Yamamoto do the work largely for us. This inspiring story about citizen action and community organizing showcases the efforts of the prominent Bay Area residents who helped set the precedent for protecting open space and shaped the environmental movement of today. Kelly and Yamamoto have been collaborating for over 30 years and *Rebels with a Cause* is their 7th project together (the film was made in collaboration with Sonoma County's public broadcasting station KRCB). They are married and reside in Greenbrae. The film airs on May 30 at 7pm at the New People Cinema, 1746 Post Street, San Francisco. The San Francisco Green Film Festival runs from May 30-June 5. Bay Nature caught up with Kelly and Yamamoto to discuss the genesis of their latest film.



Rebels with a Cause filmmakers Kenji Yamamoto and Nancy Kelly.
Photo: Lou Weinert.

BN: What is your connection to the Bay Area and in particular, Point Reyes and Marin County?

Kelly: Well, we really like those parts. We've done a lot of hiking and I used to ride a horse there. I often tell this story that the original idea for the film came from Nancy Dobbs, who's the president and CEO of KRCB, North Bay public media and she had read a book by Martin Griffin called "Saving the Marin- Sonoma Coast." She asked me if I was interested and although Kenji wasn't there, I immediately said yes. When I moved to San Francisco in the 1980's I intended to be here for only three months while I edited a documentary. But then I met Kenji and I tried very hard to get him to want to do what I had been doing, which was being a ranch hand and he was like, 'Are you nuts? I do not wanna do this!' So I had to figure out a way to live in San Francisco which to me, was noisy and dirty and hideous, but once I discovered that I could go out to GGNRA and Point Reyes and get my feet on the dirt everyday then I found it very livable here. That was our connection.

Yamamoto: I was living in San Francisco and we then decided to live together in Marin County where we started to discover the many trails and places to hike and run and exercise. Often I would run from Mill Valley to Stinson beach where Nancy had her horse and it was a joyous way for us to combine our activities together and see the great outdoors. It was truly spectacular. We're quite familiar with the surrounding outdoors and we keep discovering new trails and new places to go to- it never seems to exhaust its wonder.

BN: After that initial meeting, how did it all start? What inspired you to make ‘Rebels with a Cause’?

Kelly: Kenji wasn’t in that original meeting where I said immediately, yes and later I said, let me talk to Kenji first! So, we talked about it and then I think I wrote the first couple of sentences describing it in November 2004. KRCB raised some development money so we were able to do a little bit of shooting in 2006. We interviewed the people that were in the Bolinas Lagoon chapter, Huey Johnson and Marty Griffin, and that was the first story that we shot and which we used for our trailer and fundraising. I mean really all we did was fundraise, shoot a little bit, run out of money, fundraise [laughter]. That was what we did for eight years!

Yamamoto: And one of the things we found was quite remarkable was interviewing former Secretary of Interior, Stewart Udall, because he had a very clear memory of what had happened and his interview was just so perfect, both factually and emotionally. He was truly engaged and embraced in making a national seashore on both sides of the coast in the United States and he was really, very lucid when we interviewed him. That really got us.

BN: The cinematography is really quite beautiful and captures the wild nature of Point Reyes National Seashore. Were any of these scenes particularly difficult to film?

Kelly: The beauty of it really started with the director of photography, Lou Weinert. He’s done a lot of different things, feature films, commercials, corporate, but is definitely not known for his nature work. When I talked to him about it, he thought about it for a while and then he called me and said, ‘We should only shoot the landscape in the golden hours,’ which means pre dawn, dawn, sunrise and a few minutes after that. Then the same thing on the other end of the day- pre sunset, sunset, dusk.

So what I didn’t realize when I said, ‘Oh that’s a great idea,’ was how many times I’d be getting up at 2.30 in the morning! He wanted to be in the location where we were going to be shooting, in the dark and before anything changed in the sky. This often meant that we were hiking in the dark and at first we were always forgetting our flashlights!

Yamamoto: We would say, I have at least a dozen flashlights at home!

Kelly: We pretty much knew, because we had been hiking in all those places so often, where the good place for this or that was. For the shots of the elephant seals and the tule elk, different rangers from Point Reyes National Seashore took us to places where they knew we would be able to get shots a bit closer. For the spotted owl shot — which you know is an endangered species, right — the rangers at Point Reyes National Seashore said we know the best place for you to go. You just park, walk about 1,000 yards or something, it’s kinda flat ground, easy, no problem. So we go out there, we get to the tree and the ranger looks down where the trunk of the tree meets the ground and he says ‘Is that a skull?’ And you know, in the few days between when he had gone to monitor the nest, something had eaten the baby owl and left only its skull.

So they took us to another spot but that involved hiking along a trail and then bushwhacking but we found the other spotted owl sitting on a branch looking over her nest. And those shots were all gotten with this lens that weighed forty pounds and I always had to hire someone just to lug that thing around. But I think one of the most disappointing things is that I can’t tell you how many times we paid a crew to go out and the fog would come hurling in and once it comes in, you can’t see a thing. So it’s a complete waste of time and money. But you know, what are you gonna do?

BN: Had these campaigns not succeeded, what do you imagine places such as GGNRA would look like today?

Kelly: So if you can imagine, the GGNRA starts on the south side of the Golden Gate Bridge and it goes all the way out to meet Point Reyes National Seashore and if the Marinello project had been successful, then I don't think there would be a GGNRA because the heart of it would have been high-rise buildings on every knob.

We found a map from the 1960's of the hills above Limantour beach in Point Reyes National Seashore and it was all subdivisions and cul- de- sacs and this c- shaped road called, 'Mariners Way' or something. It was really the ideas that people had for these great estates and beaches with no trespassing. You know, that stuff was real, it was going to happen. I mean it would look like where we live in Greenbrae or down on the Peninsula, like Gary Giacomini says [in the film].

BN: The documentary spans from the 1950's to the early 1980's encompassing a period of great social change. What do you think this had to do with the success of establishing open spaces like Point Reyes National Seashore?

Kelly: I guess saving those big spaces using the federal government, and the chance to do that might have passed now. But it's unbelievable how many things are going on across the United States right now. You know, they're not using federal parks or national parks but the Trust for Public Land raises money through bonds and contributions and they are involved all over the country in saving land. And there's a lot of things, like the the Miami River, and trying to reclaim that so people can hike on it. In Los Angeles, you know, the cement bound Los Angeles river there's an effort there. In Cleveland, there's a big project to connect Akron to Cleveland by the trail that is built on what used to be the toecap of the Erie Canal or a branch of the Erie Canal. And they've almost got it. It's almost 100 miles long and the last piece, this 7-mile stretch that leads to downtown Cleveland is through a really industrial area that's still spewing out smoke.

BN: With the state parks crisis we have seen several community groups organizing to raise funds and save their local parks. Are we seeing a new generation of local activists following in the footsteps of these former 'rebels'?

Yamamoto: Well I think it is true that what people had originally thought was secure parkland and open space, is in fact not. And that their state parks, that they enjoy so much and are part of their culture and life, are in danger because of a lack of funding.

So I think that that's very true, that people are waking up to realize, not only in California but nationwide, what is going on in their own neighborhood. And they value those [parks] even more than the great national parks which are often situated in the Rockies or far away places. People would like to travel less distance from their families, work and homes and they are now waking up to see value that is much closer to them even in small pockets of green within the boundaries of a city. So it makes suburban parks even more valuable beyond the state parks. I think there's an awakening that's happening pushed by our moribund, national financial crisis. People are not willing to give up on the land that is next to them.

'Rebels with a Cause' will be opening the San Francisco Green Film Festival on May 30th. The film will be out in cinemas across the Bay Area from May 31st.