

Staking a claim on 'her' Valley Springs

The Calaveras Enterprise Tuesday, June 24, 2008

FOOTHILL FOLKS

By Phillip Gomez

Joyce Techel, 68, chairwoman of myvalleysprings.com, has been a dog groomer and kennel operator for the past 20 years. But that's like saying English college instructor, poet, fiction writer and essayist Wendell Berry is a Kentucky dirt farmer. The latter gives substance to the former.

A prominent defender of agrarian values, Berry's writing is based on the idea that one's work should be rooted in one's place of residence, and that without a prosperous local economy people will have no power and the land no reverence. Techel, who said she had never heard of Berry before, sure sounds a lot like him.

Having moved from Concord to Valley Springs in 1974, Techel lives outside of town off the main side road and down a secluded dead-end lane, where she keeps a kennel next to her home and a closed-in porch for her cats, rescued from the Calaveras Humane Society. Wild turkeys and guinea hamsters roam the property, keeping rattlesnakes at bay. It's pretty quiet. On a clear day you can see Mount Diablo from her backyard.

"Most people get up in the morning and say, 'I've got to go to work today,'" Techel said. "I get up and go to play. I love what I do, being a dog groomer and kennel operator, interacting with the dogs. ... Not enough people find that way to earn a living from a job that feeds their heart as well as giving them a means to survive. ... I know how lucky I've been."

But Techel is a newshound, too, a local "newsaholic," as she calls it. Her news sources are her customers. "The whole economic thing," she said, meaning the recent downturn in the U.S. economy and the rise in fuel prices, "is a big shift in that there's an



Enterprise photo by Phillip Gomez

Joyce Techel with Shakey, a mutt she rescued from the Calaveras County Animal Shelter.

opportunity here," she said. "We're going to find out who the survivors are. I really believe that."

Techel's roots go back to Maryland, where she was born and early raised. Her great-grandparents were prairie farmers near Springfield, Ill. Her grandfather, whom she remembers well, was a newspaperman who worked for the Chicago Tribune and Sun in the 1930s and '40s until retiring in 1978 and moving to California. His name was Luther W. "Mike" Meredith. Meredith knew all the gangsters of Chicago's streets, and five presidents of the United States, Techel said. Her grandfather's

newsgathering genes obviously run in Techel's veins, but so does the legacy from his parents with their close ties to the earth.

"I think (the unraveling of a cheap-gas economy) will make us open to options that we might not have considered if this change hadn't occurred," she said. "People are already putting in small vegetable gardens ... I think they're going back to that."

Reflecting on her early involvement in political action in Valley Springs, Techel said, "When I was starting out here, if I didn't have the dog-grooming business I couldn't have reached people the way I did. I give out information and I get information."

Spending time socializing with her customers and finding out what's going on in their lives and in town is as much a part of Techel's way of life as caring for their dogs, and the two seemingly disparate enterprises have deeper connections, as well.

Three years ago, Techel stopped taking on new customers. She's not replacing customers who move away or die, either, she said.

"I have people boarding pets from Arnold, Mountain Ranch and Jackson," she explained. "That gives me information, because I'm always talking news, politics and development. Boy, do people who live up here love this place!"

Techel runs her business with the help of her sister, Melissa Anderson, and longtime friend Jeannie Simpson.

"I couldn't do this without either one of them," she said.

"We're extended family.

"It's my passion. I love this place," Techel said. "I'm a Cancer," she explained. "Their big deal is their home and family. When people hand you their

little fuzzy dogs – their little children – it creates a relationship and extended family. It's a different relationship than you find in other businesses. It's like an extended family. I think that that trust extends to what I share with them, customers I've had for 10 or 20 years.

"Communities are (based on) trust," she added. "They know I'm not lying," Techel said of the trust she had established. "You don't find that in the line of work I'm in. Dog groomers don't hang around very long. They're not always reliable as a group."

Techel was first involved politically in protesting against the county's planning of a site for the town dump in the early 1980s.

"That was the hook," she said. "That was the first time I ever got involved in political meetings."

Then in the late '80s came a hazardous-waste plan the county was trying to implement, mandated by the state.

"We were worried people would come up here and try to dispose of (toxic) waste," she said.

"The rumor around town at the time was, if you wanted to get your dog back you had to sign a petition I was carrying around," Techel said. "I'm pushy. I don't shut up. The other side is, I care about people."

In 2006, she protested the lack of government oversight given to the still-proposed Ponte Ranch development in town. That's what started myvalleysprings.com as a Web site and organization, she said.

The name came about innocently, without intentional marketing savvy.

"We wanted them to know where our Web site was," Techel said matter-of-factly. Ponte Ranch, the gigantic

development that would reroute traffic southeast from downtown, was considered a potential threat to Valley Springs' rural lifestyle. Techel wrote letters to the Calaveras County Planning Department asking questions about the project, "and I don't think that happened before in this county," she said.

Land-use planning is at the center of Techel's political concerns. "So many other things came after that," she said – the 2006 flood, the economy going south, the golf course. The last, the Ridge at Trinitas, is a development near Wallace.

"You don't take 200 and some acres and turn it into a day-spa, 30-room hotel, 18-hole golf course, a 1,000-person capacity stadium and plopped that down without any planning," she said. "It just appeared; it was like a mushroom. ... We feel like we're being nuked," she said of Ponte Ranch and Trinitas.

The existing community plan for Valley Springs is five pages long and 34 years old, Techel said.

"All of the growth in this area has occurred without the community plan being updated.

There have been a lot of shopping centers and projects maps allowed without an updated plan." MyValleySprings.com is not against growth per se, she said. "We want it planned. ... We just want it done well. We would like the existing grid of downtown Valley Springs expanded to include more businesses with residences above the businesses. Personally, I wouldn't care if they went two stories above the businesses. But if we don't create that town center where people can shop and recreate, a place where people can slow down and linger, we're going to be just a little crossroads

of two highways.

"We need to keep the town breathing after dark," Techel said. "People are leaving Valley Springs." Their human network is being lost as a result, she added. "People reach a point in their lives where they want to downsize and have to leave because they can't find a place here to live that's affordable. There are ways of building housing. ... Other communities are doing things. All we have to do is look around. But we've got to find a way of keeping Valley Springs a living, breathing town."