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John Kiefer Gets a Trail

By Sophie Braccini



John Kiefer by his namesake trail on Leslyn Lane.
Photo Sophie Braccini

Lafayette is a city that likes to celebrate its local heroes and on July 27 John Kiefer, also known as "Papa John," was honored at the dedication of the John Kiefer Trail. Held on a beautiful, warm day the ceremony was simple yet heartfelt and most of the 40 people who gathered to honor their friend headed out along on the steep, but conveniently located, path that links a whole neighborhood to the large network of Briones trails.

Kiefer is known to many as Lafayette's chicken expert who has trained hundreds of potential chicken owners for free, but not everyone knows that for several decades he has been the organizer of a trail maintenance group and that has added four new trails to Lafayette. "Making trails take time," he said, "sometimes decades. But the ones we created helped connect neighborhoods to larger trails."

The process of the creation of the John Kiefer trail was in itself complicated. First it took the sale of a large private property, a development project, and the creation of an easement for a public trail. "Only two points were identified in the development agreement," recalled Kiefer, "the start at Leslyn Lane and a connection with the Lafayette Ridge Trail in Briones Regional Park." The difficult terrain made it clear that a land survey had to be done, but there was no budget for that. "So I decided to take on the task myself," said Kiefer, who was then 25 years younger. "I simply got the maps and a hundred-foot tape measure. There was no GPS, and it was not easy to make sure the trail would stay on the correct piece of property."

During the process he met with property owners who were surprised to meet a surveyor who moved around by himself, equipped with only a tape measure. At one point, Kiefer thought he had found the perfect path, but a property owner living above the trail asked him to move it, explaining, "My wife is concerned that people might see her in her bathroom." So Kiefer moved the beginning to a steeper climb that required the addition of stairs.

The California Conservation Corps built the trail he designed and his group of volunteers has been maintaining it ever since.

Kiefer acknowledged his fellow trail maintenance volunteers including Chester Jones, who he says is always ready to help when called upon. "I am one of many volunteers in Lafayette who are grateful to live in such a community and who express their gratitude by giving back," he said.

At the dedication ceremony Kiefer read a poem he had written, giving a voice to the "Spirit of the Trail." The spirit invited those who travel on the trail to move with lightness on the path, connecting with reflection of themselves and opening windows into their souls. He said that in the natural world each gives and each receives, that to be human is to receive and to be fully human is to give. "It's your trail, it's about you, it's about balance," he concluded.

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