

New book honors those who preserve open space

BY [TRINA ORTEGA](#)
THE VALLEY JOURNAL,



- Trina Ortega photo

The Aspen Valley Land Trust (AVLT) celebrates ranching and land conservation in the Roaring Fork and Colorado river valleys this weekend with its annual Save the Land Dance fundraiser and the unveiling of its new coffee table book, "Our Place."

Photographed by Lois Abel Harlamert and written by Martha Cochran, the full-color book profiles 48 landowners in the area who have made "enormous sacrifices, both personal and financial," according to Cochran, to preserve open space.

Landowners will be honored at the dance, which takes place at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 13, at the Strang Ranch on Missouri Heights.

Cochran, who serves as executive director of AVLT, said Harlamert approached her in 2004 explaining that she had wanted to do a book about people who conserve land. The two met over lunch and Harlamert began the task of meeting with landowners from Aspen to Carbondale and Glenwood to DeBeque.

"She had so much fun," Cochran said of Harlamert, who would call the AVLT office after photo shoots to tell of her adventures riding a four-wheeler or seeing new-born lambs.

Cochran, Harlamert and graphic designer Melissa Sumera (also AVLT's office manager) each volunteered their expertise, time and resources to produce the book. Net proceeds from book sales will benefit the land trust.

Harlamert couldn't be happier about how all of the pieces came together for the book that she describes as a "miracle."

"This book turned from a vision to something that we're all proud of," she said, grateful to have met so many "lovely, generous people" as a result.

"It started off as a gift to the donors who'd given their land up for conservation. It was really a gift to me, too. It's been a wonderful experience," she said.

Additionally, she has learned about the hard work it takes to run a ranch, such as the round-the-clock calving season, hauling hay and branding.

A photographer since the mid-1970s, Harlamert would spend four or more hours with a family and in some cases, made repeat visits to the properties.

But that's what she loved about the work.

She rode all-terrain vehicles up steep roads, fed calves their evening bottles, was greeted by a pot-bellied pig, made two attempts to save a steer by purchasing him, saw — and heard — 25 bell-wearing goats running through an aspen meadow, joined one family for a farm-style dinner, and was given a gift of a dozen fresh eggs.

"It's such a privilege to have done this because I never would've met some of these families," said Harlamert, a landowner herself, with 20 acres in the Ashcroft area.

She shares the sentiment of those profiled in the book, and summed it up by recalling one photo shoot at the Hood Ranch up South Canyon.

It was an autumn day, and she was driving the road with Charlotte Hood when Hood stopped the vehicle and invited Harlamert to take in the view of the hillsides speckled with golden aspen and rich green pine.

"She told me, 'Just think, a hundred years from now this will still be the same.' And that just makes me happy," Harlamert said.

Cochran said the unknown beauty of properties like Hood's — less than three miles off I-70 and past the Glenwood Springs landfill — also make them valuable hidden gems.

"People haven't been to some of these places," Cochran said. "They'd never guess that they were so beautiful."

Cochran, a journalist by training, compiled the profiles in six months. She said she also felt privileged to meet the landowners and was challenged to keep their stories short.

"Everyone has a story, every land has a story. Many places have generations of stories.... Everyone's story is different, but they all have a connection to the land," she said.

Cochran verbalized a sentiment published in her introduction to the book:

"Most Westerners are reluctant to talk about themselves. But ask about their land and, well, it's hard to get them to stop. The people in this book have made significant sacrifices and visionary decisions to conserve their land rather than selling it for development. Why? Because they love their land — and they love to show it to you — every hillside, fence line, gully, creek, forest. Their place is our place."

The book costs \$30 and is dedicated to Lathrop Strang, an AVLT board member who died April 25 in a skiing accident on Mount Sopris.

Pre-orders can be placed via the AVLT website, www.avlt.org, and the book can be purchased online after Sept. 15.

Tickets for the Land Dance also are available online. Call 963-8440 for more information.

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