

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Preserving property: A tale of two ranches

**Scott Condon**

September 8, 2007

 [Comments \(0\)](#)  [Print](#)  [Email](#)

Wendy McNulty and her family faced financial difficulties that threatened to force them to sell their ranch.

Mike and Kit Strang and their family faced no such financial burdens, but still felt compelled to settle the fate of their property.

Both families turned to Aspen Valley Land Trust to help conserve their Missouri Heights ranches despite their different needs.



Kit Strang (Jordan Curet/Aspen Times Weekly)

[Click to Enlarge](#)

Mike and Kit bought their land in 1965 and raised four kids there. It remains a hub of agriculture uses: There is a cattle operation; daughter Bridget Strang boards horses and teaches riding; and some pasture is used to grow turf for landscaping.

The Strangs said they have always loved the land and regarded the

ranch as a home, not an investment. "We bought this land for peanuts," Mike said. "Missouri Heights was a swear word."

And for good reason, given the sunbaked, windswept, hardscrabble land, Strang said. "A jack rabbit had to pack his lunch to get across it."

But irrigation and breathtaking views work wonders. Forty-two years after they bought their 436-acre spread, Missouri Heights is embroiled in the Roaring Fork Valley's hot real estate market. Land prices have soared and many former ranch owners surrounding the Strangs took the bait. Trophy homes are closing in. The Strangs could have made a financial killing, but the parents and four children agreed on conservation.

"In our situation, we don't have any money and we don't need any money," Mike said. "We don't have any debts, either."

The Strangs have placed conservation easements on about half of the ranch and are in the process of preserving



Wendy and Katy McNulty (Jim Paussa/Special to Aspen Times Weekly)

[Click to Enlarge](#)

another quarter. AVLТ holds the easements. The Strangs received state tax credits in return for voluntarily sterilizing the land.

Kit said the deal might not have been done if any of the kids felt differently. "The last thing you want to do is leave a problem for your children to fight over," she said.

Bridget said she and her siblings, two of whom live out of state, shared a common goal of preserving the place that is special to them.

"The most awful thought for the four of us was having the ranch we grew up on becoming a development," she said.

A few miles away near the base of Cottonwood Pass, Wendy McNulty and her daughters Katy and Meg felt the same intense desire to preserve their ranch. It was homesteaded by the family of Wendy's husband, Gary.

But financial hardships placed preservation in peril. Gary was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease in 1987 and is under 24-hour-a-day medical care in Denver. The McNultys worked with AVLТ earlier this decade to donate conservation easements on part of their ranch, which is split by the Garfield-Eagle county line. The sale of tax credits temporarily eased their financial burdens, but selling for development looked more and more like a necessary evil.

Wendy continued working with AVLТ, which took a leadership role in lobbying Eagle County officials to use open space funds to buy conservation easements on the ranch. "They were completely critical to the whole process," Wendy said of AVLТ.

The Eagle County Commissioners voted 2-0 in April to buy conservation easements on 466 acres of the ranch for \$1,926,000 over a two-year period. AVLТ chipped in \$100,000 to the deal. The McNultys donated 32.6 percent of the appraised value of the conservation easement to the deal, an amount of about \$1 million.

Terms of the deal allow them to continue running their cattle operation. The family is using the funds to undertake ranch repairs that sat on the back burner for years.

"I've got no big plans for helicopter pads or a big house in Aspen," Wendy said.

They do plan to make the ranch houses on the property more environmentally friendly and make a more humane cattle operation by possibly selling grass-fed beef locally rather than shipping their calves to feedlots, she said.

Wendy said she also plans to promote land conservation to ranchers in the region and throughout the state.

---

[BACK](#) 