

Preserving the view in the valley

Aspen group releases book celebrating the wide open spaces of the valley

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colorado — Sometimes Lois Abel Harlamert steps outside her Ashcroft-area home and holds her arms up to the sky. Surrounded by trees and grass and birds, she exclaims, "I'm open to all wonderful things in the universe!"

That's how connected she feels to this valley and its land. Thankfully, she's not the only one.

Her property has already been preserved, but since the 1980s, more than 130 area residents have shown their love of the land through conservation easements. With the help of the Aspen Valley Land Trust, they've been able to keep their scenic acreage, and also protect it from development in perpetuity. The legal jargon and paperwork is complex, but the outcome is wonderfully simple. More than 20,000 acres have been saved — and they will be forever.

Harlamert thinks that deserves a celebration.

The new coffee table book, "Our Place," is just that. In it, 48 of these landowners are profiled with a caring, reverent touch. Harlamert provided the pictures of the people (set against the backdrops of their properties), and AVL T executive director Martha Cochran wrote their biographies. Though the original idea came from Harlamert, the finished product looks nothing short of a collaboration — not only between the writer and photographer, but the property owners as well.

"I think we should all be thankful for these people," said Harlamert.

And who, exactly, are they?
In Cochran's words, "Just folks."

As she spent about six months distilling their stories into bite-sized bits of prose, she found that they come from all walks of life. They're rich ranchers and middle class farmers and people whose property has simply been in their family for generations.

Politically, socially, they must have wildly different opinions on things, but apparently not when it comes to their land. All those profiled could have made hundreds of thousands (and perhaps millions) of dollars if they allowed their land to be developed, but their priorities are loftier than that.

"I think what they have in common is that they're thoughtful about a world bigger than themselves," Cochran said.

She could have been describing AVL T, as well. Every day she works there, she gets to help people maintain the beauty of a place they love. In ten years or so, she estimates that all of the valley will either have been developed or preserved, but her and AVL T's job won't be done. They'll have to keep monitoring the lands, making sure they're being used as they should. There's no ego to this kind of work, she explained. With the Trust, as with the book, her goal looks to be the same. She wants people to see how special this corner of the world is — and how they really can defend it for the coming generations.

"It's so not about me," she said. "It's sort of humbling."

While Harlamert didn't use the exact same words, it was obvious that she agreed. It feels "good to do something for the good of something," she explained.

"I have to be creating all the time," she said, "and so if it has a purpose, that makes me happy."

For her, the purpose is everywhere. She sees it in the local animals and landscapes, and even in the rocks. She believes every natural thing has just as much a right to be here as anything else. The combination of all that beauty and wildlife feels spiritual and calming to her. Though she's had 20 acres in the wilds of Pitkin County for two decades, in a way, she doesn't feel like she owns it. She just happens to live on it and care for it. When she came up with the idea for this book, her goal was to honor those who understand that way of life.

"I was thinking of thanking the people for their easements and hoping to inspire others," she said.

It's an ongoing thing. Now 71, she plans on documenting this land and its people until she's 100. The next volume of the project is slated for publication in 2010, and she's excited about it, rearing to get out and shoot. As "Our Place" did, she's sure the sequel will take her to spots that she never would have known about otherwise. She seemed honored to have such a window into people's lives.

Most of all, though, she simply sounded thankful to live here.

"For me to even be where I am, it's a miracle," she said, in awe.

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- Courtesy photo by Lois Abel Harlamert



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