

# A SLOW AND STEADY STREAM OF PROGRESS

**Melanie Winter brings environment to forefront with The River Project**

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“What river?”

If there is one question which most baffles Melanie Winter, that would probably be it.

The river referenced is the Los Angeles River. And when it is remembered, it’s usually as the cement channel where two Terminators had a high-speed chase in the movie T 2. Or, sadly, as the place of deadly drownings come storm season.

Winter, the director and creator of the non-profit Studio City based The River Project, says the reason for the confusion about the river is that it’s encased in concrete due to it becoming a flood control channel in 1938. Therefore, it doesn’t look like the typical river. And, as one of the nation’s most endangered rivers, it is but a shadow of its once glorious self.

But now, Winter, whom Sunset Magazine touted as a “Champion of the West,” with a 2003 Environmental Award, is single-handedly trying to change all that. For over a decade the San Fernando Valley native has been a powerful force trying to make a difference in the vast environmental landscape of Los Angeles.

For the last eight years, Winter has dedicated her life to The River Project—writing grants to private foundations and government agencies; meeting with city officials and community members in an effort to change policies and ordinances; working with students and integrating school curriculum; planting trees and native plants; building greenways—all with the intention of creating a community oriented society and understanding how to best use our most overlooked environmental resource.

Examples of Winter’s passion and diligence can be viewed right in our Studio City backyard. In an

effort to bring community together by utilizing open space, she has spearheaded the development of several greenway parks along the river: the Valleyheart Greenway (between Laurel Canyon and Radford) and the Studio City Greenway (between Laurel and Whitsett). Winter hopes to extend the greenway east and west, but as all non-profits know, those hopes are elevated or diminished by grants, government and community support.

Valleyheart Greenway is set to open in May and is a result of a community based educational program which Winter introduced to a few classes at Carpenter Avenue School three years ago. Through an integrated curriculum, students in second grade and fourth and fifth grades learned about the river, native plants and watershed issues. Students planted trees and plants and created conceptual designs.

Student Michael Harris, who is currently in seventh grade, drew (as a fourth grader) a Great Toad Gate, inspired by the idea that toads once called the Los Angeles River home. Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky was so enamored by Michael's design that he asked the Flood Control District to fund the The River Project to facilitate its development. Local artist Lahni Baruck translated Michael's vision into reality, and the gate will now stand at the Laurel Canyon entrance.

Other student inspired amenities include a butterfly bench and garden with flowering plants to attract hummingbirds and butterflies and a rattlesnake seating wall. Future plans include a picnic area; a slide embedded into a slope to meander like a river; animal-like sculptures; and a story fence (engraved with student stories).

The Studio City Greenway is currently undergoing development. Most recently, Winter worked with students from Carpenter Avenue School, Walter Reed Middle School and North Hollywood High School, to create poetry about the river. Fourteen selected poems, which were performed at a live poetry jam sponsored by The River Project two months ago, will be engraved into river rock—as soon as a grant is received to cover the expense.

The River Project's educational program has been named in the State Board of Education's California Guide to Environmental Literacy as one of the best environmental education projects in the state. "Kids are motivated to learn deeply by doing hands-on projects," says Winter.

Another nearby project undergoing a comprehensive two and a half year study is the Tujunga Wash subwatershed, which will assess how it functions with Hansen Dam and how to manage water resources, flood management issues and open space most effectively.

Winter's most high profile success to date is Taylor Yard, the 200 plus acre historic site north of downtown. After the passage in 2000 of statewide parks bond Prop 12, Winter and The River Project lobbied the Governor and the State Legislature to create the first new State Park in Los Angeles. The Coalition for a State Park at Taylor Yard, organized by The River Project, advocated for a 100-acre urban park along the Los Angeles River, which would meet the complex needs of the community. The integration of the park is currently underway and the California State Parks has agreed to facilitate the vision in definitive phases.

Winter's activist role arose rather from a sudden epiphany. "I was driving my truck back from New York to help out my parents (where she had successfully worked and lived as an actress for 10 years) and was shocked to see what seemed to be 300 percent development. I mean, it was like the Los Angeles county line started two hours earlier because so much concrete had been built up. We have more asphalt here than in the entire country of Spain!"

The Los Angeles riots were a turning point for Winter, who says she "started running around doing everything I could for social and political causes." Name it, she did it. Women's Action Coalition,

Bohemian Women's Political Alliance, LA Breast Cancer Alliance, TreePeople. Friends of the Los Angeles River.

But it wasn't until she met Dorothy Green, who started Heal the Bay, that she began to understand the critical importance of the river, the watershed issue and how it all ties the community together. And The River Project was born.

"Growing up here, I was always aware of the river and had this connection to it. Every time I crossed the freeway, I looked towards the reflection of the sun or the moon on the water...no matter how much water was there, I always thought it was beautiful," she says.

Winter compares the 52 miles of the Los Angeles River, which extends from just beyond the Canoga Park High Football Field to Long Beach, complete with a spectacular wildlife reserve at Sepulveda Basin, lakes and tributaries, to the "circulatory system of the human body as the veins and capillaries merge together to form the heart." She views the river as a way to connect communities through greenways, bikeways, community parks, equestrian trails and pedestrian paths.

Most important to understand, however, is that it all starts with an 871 square mile Los Angeles watershed, encompassing the Santa Susanna Mountains to the west, the San Gabriel Mountains to the north and east, and the Santa Monica Mountains and Los Angeles Coastal plain to the south.

The Los Angeles River is at the heart of the watershed, which is defined as an area of land where all of the water that is under it or drains off of it goes into same place. All living things are linked by this common water source, thereby creating a community around it.

Winter's goal is to help the community and the city government to understand that the river is what can tie all communities together. "Compartmentalized thinking creates fragmentation. We must put together a plan for interdependence," says Winter. "We need to integrate the planning and management process to effectively reach a solution. We need to start thinking about sustainability and working with nature rather than against it. If we can do that, we can wisely use our resources to create a better environment."

Ultimately, Winter hopes to see river greenways all along the 52 mile river. "Depending where you are, there should be linear parks, connected to larger community parks...like bigger and smaller jewels on a necklace."

She continues, "People need to be aware that the river exists, acknowledge its place in history, and understand how it can best be utilized as something that connects communities, according to respective community needs. The river can most definitely better our lives by understanding the function of the watershed and the water by tapping into its natural resources."

On May 1, volunteers are needed when The River Project sponsors the Catch Basin Marker Pilot project in conjunction with the City of Los Angeles' Bureau of Sanitation in an effort to help reduce trash in the river. "Don't Dump - Drains to Los Angeles River" signage will be installed. This compliments Heal the Bay's successful "Don't Dump - Drain to Ocean" campaign and points out that not only is the ocean polluted by illegal dumping but that the Los Angeles River and adjacent communities are adversely affected by litter as well.

For further information about volunteering, grants and fundraising, contact The River Project at 818-980-9660 or email [info@theriverproject.org](mailto:info@theriverproject.org). Check out the website at [www.theriverproject.org](http://www.theriverproject.org)