

DENA GROSS LEAVENGOOD

I met Dena Leavengood 33 years ago at her Water Management District Wetlands Protection exhibit in a brand new Harbour Island retail center. The retail would fail except for Jackson's Restaurant and a taffy shop. Ten years later, a tram to downtown would be torn down, but Dena's love and protection of the environment would never be torn down, nor ever dimmed.

Great aquarium education would follow the Florida native's UF zoology degree and masters at USF. She was asked by a vet school all-male panel for admission, how she, being so small, could handle large animals. I will get big dumb men to handle, she responded.

She put the high octane attainability in sustainability. Her victories were often of conscience like the League of Women Voter's education, access, fair districting and unfettered voter access. All were legendary as your great president recruiting hundreds of us, co-teaching a civics course of many of us at UT. She founded the Hillsborough Health Care Coalition. She put the real in resiliency before resiliency was cool. A melting earth she also tried to cool as she cooled misguided politicians, water and air polluters, blockers of healthcare access for all or government immigration bureaucrats who lost their way.

She had no shortfall of height in heights of brave conscience, a brilliant caring heart and advocacy. She was a champion finding, inspiring, recruiting and training, and oh the best parts – we have the scars: qualifying and unleashing, like our Hillsborough Tomorrow and Tomorrow Matters county-wide visioning. The latter was three-a-day e-mails for 10 years to over a thousand, 10 million visionings in 10 years with smart planning, sustainable water policy, social justice and growth management. Like Gandhi said, a citizen who is right is a majority. She made citizenship engagemanship, consciencemanship. No community can survive long without engagemanship and consciencemanship.

Mark Twain said of focus, you can't depend on your eyes if your imagination is out of focus. Dena's imagination was never out of focus. It was for a more sustainable planet, social justice and enlightened Florida electorate. Poet Pablo Neruda—in his poem *The Song of Despair*—must have had Dena in mind. "There was thirst and hunger and you were the fruit. There was grief and ruin, and you were the miracle." Dena was the miracle in social and environmental justice.

In 2008, 30,000 real estate and construction people were out of work. She helped me found Real Estate Lives helping 4,200 back to work in 11 years, 530 consecutive Tuesday counseling sessions, every other Thursday, 100 in attendance the first 2 years. Starting, she said, "Do not righteously think you know the victims' needs—bring them to the center of the table, sit behind them, listen to them, and then act."

In Real Estate Lives, she resisted any committee, which she knew was a cul de sac you could lure ideas down to quietly strangle them to death. No, she put the victims in the middle of the table. We stepped away and listened to healthcare, daycare, transportation to job interviews and real issues as if our life depended on it—for their families' lives did and do depend upon it. We helped 4,300 because Dena would not let us lead the helping idea down a cul de sac to be quietly strangled to death.

Thank you League of Women Voters for letting her lead us all to an enlightened, engaged, unfettered, educated, mobilized inclusive electorate. Thank dozens of Tomorrow Matters leaders like Dena for three-a day, 10-year 10 million touches and visions of sustainability and social justice.

She educated on a hundred issues. She was afraid of no politician, no government, no corporation, no polluter, no power broker. She opposed some of our clients until they were more environmentally responsible. Her last issue of water quality, she told paramedics her last few hours, they had to get her well two days later for her Friday 8:00 a.m. water quality plea to Café Con Tampa. She did not make it.

Immigration reform was next to last, she could not watch another youth drown in a Texas river when what was needed was a just hearing of his cause for immigration and need for non-separation from his family. She was the Mama Bear of the important issues of our time. God has her now and I bet He put her at the front gate so that heaven's bureaucrats would not keep out the worthy, if those bureaucrats forgot the mercy that got them in.

Thank her brother, Aaron. Thank her Cowboy Dad Marvin. Thank her sister. Thank her artist mom. Thank her grandmother, who stopped some Florida development laying down in front of a bulldozer.

Dena's legacy is not some amendment or policy alone but the hearts and minds of the hundreds of thousands she helped and assured a clean resilient sustainable environment. She was a blessed peacemaker of issues as a convener to solve community-ripping issues and kiss and make up, beatitude – worthy.

Like the hero in *Grapes of Wrath*, for Dena, when a farmer is kicked off his land, she'll be there; a bigger guy beating up a little one, she'll be there; where a polluter is that no one will stand up to, she will be there; where immigrating children are separated from their families, she will be there.

Dena's greatest passion from day 1 was her laying down even her last health for Florida's water's quality. It reminds me of Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings', *The Yearling*—grizzled civil war veteran Penny Baxter begged his wife Ory to let their last child Jen, not yet taken by Florida's diseases and wilderness, enjoy Florida wild. Penny said Jen stood agazed and breathless at the wonderment of the Florida's wild creatures and sun and wind and air and lightning, like Penny had as a boy agazed breathless, before grizzled by the civil war.

Dena stood agazed, breathless protecting her Florida wilds in wonderment at the Florida wilds. Lee Greenwood wrote a song worthy of Valentine's Day. I cannot sing but this is more than a poem "Give her rain, she'll find the rainbow. Give her sand and she'll find the sea. Give her thorns, she'll find the roses. See the love she found in me (and thee)."

Send Dena rain and she'll store and protect it. Send her sand and she'll protect it from the rising sea, give her thorny politicians and she will re-find their conscience. See the love of community she found in us.