

HER GRANDFATHER WOULD APPROVE

‘I GREW up with cowboys. My grandfather — in my mind — was John Wayne. He just looked like him. Six-foot-two, big hands — he was a rancher,’ explained Pebble Beach resident Melanie Scherer, director of SNIP, the Spay-Neuter Imperative Project.

She loved being surrounded by the dogs, horses, cattle and other animals at the ranch and couldn’t wait to get there on weekends to be with her grandparents. She spent a significant portion of her early life there, and that became the genesis of her

Great Lives

By CARLIN JARDINE

mission to provide better lives for large numbers of dogs and cats.

Scherer, 54, was raised in Modesto by a single mom who taught her she could be anything she wanted. She has always been close to her grandparents and extended family, too. “Outdoorsy,” is how she describes herself, and she played a number of sports in school.

When it came to choosing a career, she said, “My original intention was to be a dental hygienist. Then I realized: I can’t work on people’s mouths all day, because they can’t talk to me.”

Determination

Armed with a bachelor’s degree in science and marketing, she instead created, operated and later sold a successful executive recruitment company in the East Bay. She also traveled frequently to the desert with a man named Richard, a passionate golfer and business executive who became her husband in 2004. After that, the Scherers purchased a second home in La Quinta, about 20 miles from Palm Springs.

“I wasn’t doing the recruiting thing any longer and had to do something other than play golf,” Scherer said. She attended a fundraiser for a struggling animal rescue group and offered to help. “I was determined not to let it close,” she said. With her sales and marketing background, her gift for fundraising, and help from friends, she ensured it didn’t.

A luncheon Scherer and her colleagues created evolved into a highly acclaimed regional event raising \$200,000 annually, allowing her to help the group and similar operations in the Coachella Valley. When she visited the nearby Thousand Palms Shelter, she was horrified and saddened by the number of animals there. Shocked by the experience, she said she wondered

where they’d all come from and added, “I’m not a crier, but I went back to my car, and I cried.”

“On the ranch, my grandfather would say, ‘I hear you, I feel the problem. Give me the solution.’ That’s how I was raised.” She told her husband she was going to buy a mobile unit, put together a veterinary team and provide spay and neutering services to areas with overcrowded shelters, primarily in underserved regions of Riverside County. Her goal was to reduce the number of abandoned and neglected animals and offer services for a nominal fee for those who wanted to do the right thing but couldn’t afford what she estimated as \$350 to \$750 or more to spay or neuter their pets. (While SNIP’s published fee schedule includes comparable fees, there is a sliding scale for those who can’t pay them.)

Plea for help

She recalled the moment things unexpectedly came together. “Truth be told, I had no idea what I was doing. God took me by the hand in 2015 and guided me to a spay/neutering mobile unit for sale by a program called SNIP.” She bought the unit, adopted the acronym, reorganized and reenergized SNIP and started up in June 2016, financing the venture with her own funds.

The Scherers eventually sold their home near San Francisco and moved here, spending half the year in La Quinta and half on the Monterey Peninsula. People in Monterey County learned of SNIP’s success in the Coachella Valley and began calling, asking for help. The Scherers purchased a second mobile unit, put together another

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PHOTO/COURTESY MELANIE SCHERER

Melanie Scherer, whose nonprofit, SNIP, offers low-cost spay and neuter services for pets, is motivated by her love of animals.

Photography is therapy for settling ‘big questions of aging’

THE SOMBER image that fine-art photographer Eduardo Fujii will exhibit through Aug. 31 at Monterey Museum of Art is a glimpse into the complex mind of a person reflecting on 70 years of life and seeking context for whatever might come next.

His black-and-white photo collage, “Where Shadows Hold Memory,” is one of 800 works of art, from 122 local artists for the inaugural Monterey Biennial, a showcase that opened Thursday.

An opening celebration, scheduled 11

he is a person of mixed race. His father, who passed away in 2013, was Japanese — but a native of Brazil — his mother, Italian and Austrian.

“It’s been very confusing sometimes,” said Fujii, who grew up in Brazil and speaks English and Portuguese. “I’ve realized that I use my art as a kind of therapy. I like to investigate these things and understand more about my identity through my photography. There is a part of me in every photograph I take, and I think that reflects in the dark, moody imagery that I create today.”

Fujii’s parents prepared him for a successful life. By age 5, he was learning to paint, a talent that became profitable as a high school student, when he sold an

entire wall of art to an aficionado who loved the cityscapes he was creating.

He also was enrolled at 5 in a music school, where he became enamored with the classical music he still plays on the grand piano in his living room.

‘Cannot live without music’

“I love music — always classical. I cannot live without it,” said Fujii, who earned a degree from a conservatory in his home city of São Paulo.

As a student at the University of São Paulo, he earned a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering with an emphasis on computer science. In 1992, he attended the then-Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey for two years of postgraduate work in international public administration, nonproliferation, quantitative analysis, and policy studies.

Since 1995, he has been employed full-time by MIIS as a systems analyst, computer programmer, and videographer, developing a variety of database-driven web applications for information on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.

In 2004, he devoted two months to a United Nations internship at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, Austria.

“I didn’t even have a camera then — I was too busy with school and work — which is a regret I have today. Vienna is

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Pebble Beach artist Eduardo Fujii, a fine-art photographer, classical pianist, and computer scientist, will show a moody, emotional piece of his work through Aug. 31 at Monterey Museum of Art’s first Biennial Exhibition. The artists reception is 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

PHOTO/COURTESY EDUARDO FUJII

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LIVES

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team, and, in 2018, began serving Monterey County and adjoining regions, helping to significantly reduce the ever-growing number of unwanted and homeless animals being dropped off in fields or dumped on back roads. The group’s website says that it has cared for more than 80,000 animals since its inception.

Kern County has two mobile SNIP units. This year, a new one in Sacramento has conducted 22 to 25 clinics monthly, and the group soon will be serving the Fresno area, as well.

Monterey County’s mobile unit conducts 25 to 30 clinics a month in rural areas, with more than 400 pets getting spayed or neutered. That number increased to 2,700 a month with the addition of the 50 to 70 clinics carried out in Kern County units, she said.

Describing pet overpopulation as “a massive, daunting crisis,” Sherer said she and members of the SNIP committee “vigorously lobby the state of California for mandatory spaying and neutering, as was recently implemented in Seaside,” a decision she praised. (The Seaside ordinance grants some exceptions, including for legitimate breeders, for example.)

“I give huge kudos to our Monterey Board of Supervisors and the City of Salinas, who recognize the problem and realize there is a solution, if municipally funded through SNIP,” she added, noting that the county and city contributed taxpayer funds to the project.

‘She thinks I’m crazy’

She personally manages the operations of the four SNIP units in Monterey County, Kern County and Sacramento and is on her cell phone numerous times daily with the teams. “But I also love being hands-on and ‘boots on the ground’ at our clinics as often as I can. My assistant, who’s 20 years younger, thinks I’m crazy,” Scherer admitted.

She claims the success of SNIP is because of the dedicated and highly skilled veterinarians and assistants who surround her, have her back and share her vision. “I call them my family,” said Scherer.

“We have to be there for our children, be their voice and don’t let things happen to them because they can’t protect themselves, and equally, we have to do the same for our pets,” she offered. “I don’t have children. My dogs are my children, and I love them.”

ARTIST

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a very beautiful place, and I wish I’d taken some photos there,” he said.

“Then, one day, I woke up and said, ‘Oh, I need to do this!’” said Fujii, who bought his first digital camera in 2006, and has spent the past two decades learning how to use it for fine art.

He has no formal training but credits numerous well-known photographers as mentors, including locals Martha Casanave, Jane Olin, Oakland’s Elizabeth Opalenik, and Oliver Klink of Los Gatos, among others.

“I absorb a lot just being around talented photographers,” said Fujii, a member of Image Makers of Monterey. “I observe their energy, their talent, their creativity, and it’s helped me improve a lot.”

As an artist, he thinks deeply about life, the world and the universe.

One series of photographs, “Fractured Souls: Capturing the Ethereal,” features ghost-like images that emerged from his experimentation with long-exposure photography.

“The Uncertain Nature of Reality” is a series inspired by his fascination with quantum theory and his exploration of “the logic-defying concepts of quantum mechanics from a philosophical point of view.” The images are collages composed from photographs of ballet dancers in rehearsal.

Roots and branches

A black-and-white still life of flora in a forest won Fujii Photographer of the Year honors at the Black & White Spider Awards in Los Angeles, which attracted 12,000 photographers from around the world.

His luminous full-color series, “The Psychology of Trees,” captures “the symbiotic dance between trees and humanity — a dance where the roots of understanding intertwine and the branches of imagination reach for the celestial realms,” Fujii wrote on his website.

“The big questions of aging — who am I, where am I going — those are the directions my art is headed today,” he said. “These are unresolved issues that I need to resolve, and I feel like the imagery I’m creating might help me with that.”

Images of his art and additional information, can be found at eduardofujii.photography.

More information about the Monterey Biennial, including an online gallery of some of the work on exhibit, can be found at montereyart.org.

Dennis Taylor is a professional freelance writer in Monterey County. Contact him at scribelaureate@gmail.com.

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