Conserving the Cove

On the heels of its latest success—receiving approval to restore 17 remaining historic cottages—Crystal Cove Alliance announces its rebranding as Crystal Cove Conservancy.

By Tess Eyrich | Photos by J. Christopher Launi/courtesy of Crystal Cove Conservancy
Since its grassroots founding in 1999, Crystal Cove Alliance (CCA) has experienced a handful of watershed moments that have defined the nonprofit’s reputation as one of Orange County’s leading advocates of preservation. This summer, however, may mark the organization’s proudest moment yet. In late May, CCA announced its formal transition to Crystal Cove Conservancy (The Conservancy), a move made to signify the final phase of the group’s plan to create a self-sustaining space that honors Crystal Cove’s historical and natural wonders while providing an educational backdrop for the next generation of preservationists and environmentalists.

Two of the organization’s largest initiatives are restoration of the remaining north beach cottages and developing a new educational program focused on coastal engineering. The project to finish restoring the cottages—given a green light by the California Coastal Commission in March—will require a monumental, $35 million fundraising endeavor. Although the commission’s permit approval came with $5 million to enhance coastal access, there has been a misconception by some in the community that the project is now fully funded. This couldn’t be further from the truth. The Conservancy must raise the rest of the money and is committed to doing so.

“Unveiling our new name will help locals and visitors alike better understand what we’re about here at Crystal Cove,” says Laura Davick, a third-generation “Coveite” who established the nonprofit organization that would become The Conservancy to protect Crystal Cove’s 3.2 miles of coastline, thousands of acres of backcountry land and collection of 46 historic cottages from threats of contemporary overdevelopment. “Our new name shows what we’re about: building a long-term vision and creating a legacy. We’re here for the long haul, and we’re committed to delivering all the things a conservancy typically brings to a community.”

DEFENDING THE COAST

For Davick, leading the charge to preserve the cove was instinctual. “My family has been [tent camping] here since 1937, so I’ve seen Crystal Cove in a way most people haven’t,” she says. “That vision of what Crystal Cove could be motivated the project.” Davick likens the experience of coming of age in the cove to growing up on an island, isolated from the suburban development that gradually overtook most of Orange County throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As a Coveite, she was one of the lucky few to grow up on land that remained relatively untouched despite being acquired by the Irvine family during the Civil War.

As the silent film industry flourished throughout the early 20th century, the Irvine family allowed movie production companies to use the cove as a set. Around the same time, visitors—usually friends and employees of the Irviness—began camping on the beach for temporary stays, which morphed into permanent ones as guests constructed makeshift dwellings using foraged materials like driftwood. Over the years, a tight-knit community of cottages evolved, fostered in part by a new system of low-cost leases offered by the Irvine Co. to the families that built these shelters.

But in 1979, the Irvine Co. opted to sell the land to California State Parks, which later on entered into a contract with a private real estate developer in the 1990s, with plans on the horizon to create a luxury resort. “When I started seeing what was about to happen here with the resort plans moving forward, I felt I needed to step forward and do what I could to try to make a difference,” Davick says. “I had no fundraising or community organizing experience when...
I started the original organization, the Alliance to Rescue Crystal Cove, in 1999. I was actually in the for-profit world at the time, working in real estate development in Florida.” Her childhood connection to the area inspired her to develop a plan of her own: an inclusive approach predicated on the notion that the land should be available to all people, “not just the rich and famous,” she adds. “We have a lot of beautiful resorts in our community, but we want to offer a different experience here—one that’s affordable and attainable to the everyday person. I also very much wanted to see educational venues as part of the alternative vision.”

Working closely with California State Parks and other stakeholder groups and nonprofit organizations, Davick crafted a new strategy based on a public-private partnership. The organization that officially became Crystal Cove Alliance in 2003—and now Crystal Cove Conservancy—is the nonprofit partner of Crystal Cove State Park and sits over both a stable of educational programs and a for-profit subsidiary, Crystal Cove Beach Cottages, which includes low-cost overnight accommodations. Additionally, there are two subcontracted, for-profit dining venues: The Beachcomber Cafe and Crystal Cove Ruby’s Shake Shack. Proceeds from the cottage lodging and food concessions support the park’s ongoing maintenance and restoration. This unique model is held up as an example of how state parks can be successfully managed in the future. The Conservancy’s contract with the state parks system is set to last at least another 40 years; the organization, meanwhile, is fundraising to restore the remaining 17 historic cottages (the first 22 were unveiled in 2006, and another seven in 2011), which will complete the project, effectively making The Conservancy a self-sustaining entity.

TRANSFORMING AN ICON
To celebrate reaching this final leg of the journey, Davick and the organization’s President and CEO Alix Hobbs, who came onboard last August after overseeing the Santa Monica-based organization Heal the Bay, decided to initiate a full-scale rebranding of CCA. The process, which quietly kicked off in spring 2016, involved overhauling everything from CCA’s name, logo and joint website (crystalcove.org) to ensure brand harmony between the nonprofit and for-profit subsidiary (Crystal Cove Beach Cottages). This was another important step as the organization prepares for its ambitious initiatives of final restoration and expanded educational programs.

“We’re trying to set a new precedent for how the organization should be perceived in the community,” Hobbs says. “The whole purpose behind evolving into Crystal Cove Conservancy is to demonstrate the organization is progressing—this will be our legacy.”

The concept of legacy also served as a creative touchstone for the team at Buchanan Brand & Design, the San Diego-based firm that consulted on The Conservancy’s rebranding efforts. According to the firm’s President and Creative Director Bobby Buchanan, paying homage to Crystal Cove’s history and future was of the utmost importance throughout the collaborative process. “There were a lot of stakeholders involved in the rebranding: the organization’s board members, donors, staff, supporters and the community at large, as well as the state parks system,” he says, noting that a significant chunk of the firm’s research included first-person interviews and conversations with locals who maintain strong ties to the area.

CREATING A FUTURE
The cottage restoration is perhaps the most visible aspect of the project and Davick often fields...
questions from the community about the timeline. As she says, “Everyone keeps asking, ‘When are you going to finish the north beach cottages?’ The answer is simple: Once we have successfully raised the $35 million.” The project will be constructed in two phases—the infrastructure first (utilities, sewage lines and boardwalk/service path) followed by the actual cottage restoration.

Of course, the transformation isn’t merely an aesthetic one. Upon completion, the Crystal Cove experience will be massively improved for visitors, who will be able to reap the benefits afforded by the additional restored cottages. And, notably, of the $5 million in mitigation funding allotted by the California Coastal Commission to help cover the project’s costs, $1 million is for an education endowment. A portion of that is expected to go toward expanding The Conservancy’s range of educational programs that provide thousands of schoolchildren each year with one-of-a-kind experiences in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.

“Right now, our educational programs include the Michael and Tricia Berns Environmental Study Loop, which introduces students to land-management concepts, and a marine biology experience that takes kids on citizen-science cruises over our 1,150-acre underwater park,” Hobbs explains. “But as part of the permit approval for the restoration of the remaining 17 cottages, we’re going to create an additional program: coastal engineering. We’ll take a look at the dynamic coast of California and study the changes that have occurred—and continue to occur—because of climate change and rising sea levels.” The goal is to introduce students to concepts like hydrology, soil erosion, water quality and flooding in an effort to make the subject matter less foreign and intimidating, especially to students who aren’t accustomed to spending time in coastal areas. “We’re talking about topics students usually don’t gravitate toward, but only because they haven’t been exposed to them growing up inland,” she explains. “When you bring students from a Title I school—which is generally a school in a lower-income area—to the coast, it’s an entirely new experience for them.” These programs are being developed in partnership with University of California, Irvine and The Henry Samueli School of Engineering.

The broader hope is that a larger population of students will enjoy the park as a sort of outdoor classroom and thus be inspired to become stewards of their own environments. “We’re trying to engage younger students now so hopefully they’ll choose environmental science as a course of study in college,” Hobbs adds. “If we’re not educating the next generation with tools to make informative decisions as the coastline experiences more pressure from the urban push, then all of this work we’re doing will have been for nothing.” 

---

**THE COVE COMES ALIVE**

Experience the wonders of historic Crystal Cove State Park with these special summer events for kids and adults alike.

**EVERY WEDNESDAY THROUGH AUG. 30:** Enjoy a range of educational activities for the whole family—think traditional craft-making and science experiments—at the park’s Education Commons; this free program, open to guests of all ages, runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**JULY 27 AND AUG. 24:** This summer sees the return of Crystal Cove Conservancy’s Historic Films on the Beach series; stop by for free 8 p.m. showings of the 1963 romp “Beach Party” (July 27) and 1944’s “To Have and Have Not” (Aug. 24) starring Humphrey Bogart.

**JULY 29-30:** Held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, The Conservancy’s annual summer art show spotlights the work of some of the region’s most talented plein air artists in a spectacular environment.

**AUG. 12:** A free Field Science Saturday program—on the second Saturday of each month from 9:30-11:30 a.m.—gives citizen scientists an opportunity to help collect data for The Conservancy’s ongoing research projects.

**AUG. 19-20:** The Conservancy’s yearly Beach Bazaar brings together local artisans for a weekend of open-air markets in the Historic District from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. both days.

**AUG. 20 AND SEPT. 17:** Join The Conservancy founder and Vice President Laura Davick for a Founder’s Tour of Crystal Cove’s Historic District. This walking tour runs the third Sunday of every month (except December) from noon to 2 p.m., and meets on the dock outside the overnight check-in at Cottage 35.

For more information, visit crystalcove.org.