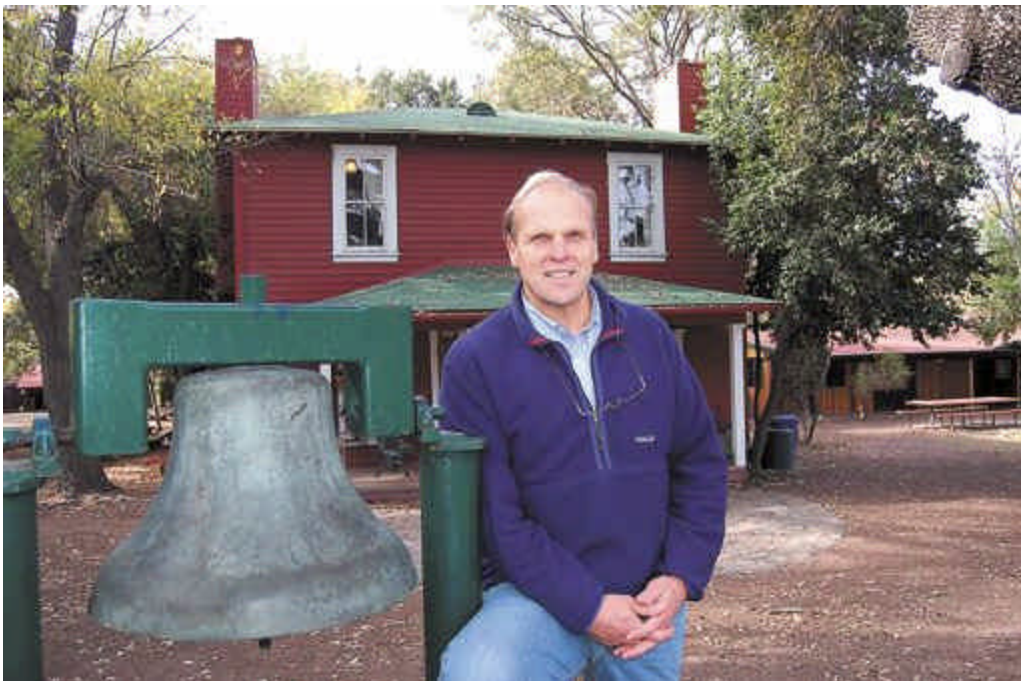


Living off the land : \$4.5 million grant means Midland students will forever be surrounded by untouched acreage

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Will Graham, Midland School headmaster.

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Nestled amid the sprawling oak habitat of the Santa Ynez Valley, Midland School was founded 75 years ago to instill in its students lifetime learning, self-reliance, simplicity, responsibility to the environment and a love of the outdoors.

The rustic campus -- where college-preparatory students grow their own organic produce, power some of the school by solar energy projects and build wood burning fires to heat their showers -- boasts 2,860 acres on Figueroa Mountain Road.

Now, thanks to a \$4.5 million conservation easement with the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County, most of that expanse will remain free from development in perpetuity.

Midland's board agreed to allow the purchase of a conservation easement that would ensure no development occurs on 2,727 acres of the property, just a few miles from the township of Los Olivos. A \$4.1 million grant was awarded by the state's Wildlife Conservation Board last month, and the check was placed into escrow Tuesday. The easement is an agreement between the school, the Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land and the California Transportation Commission.

"It's our responsibility to protect it for generations to come," explained Will Graham, head of the school. "We're providing a natural environment for kids to be close to the natural world and live simply while preparing for competitive colleges. For us to be surrounded by development would diminish our academic program."

In addition to the Wildlife Conservation Board funds, the Land Trust also received a \$350,000 grant from Caltrans's Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program. The organization also raised about \$60,000 from local contributions to cover closing costs, potential legal challenges and to pay for monitoring and enforcement of the easement.

The school property is surrounded by UCSB's 5,896-acre Sedgwick Reserve to the east and the Los Padres National Forest to the northeast, creating a virtually uninterrupted view of a natural setting.

"People should understand that when they drive down Figueroa Mountain and see Midland School, everything up that canyon will stay the way it is," said Michael Feeney, executive director of the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County.

The campus, which encompasses Alamo Pintado Creek to Grass Mountain and Lookout Peak in the San Rafael Mountains, has wildlife that includes black bear, mountain lions, bobcats and raptors. Students and faculty have a reforestation program for the valley oak woodland in the area, and there are 130 acres of undisturbed blue oak woodland. The Santa Barbara jewelflower, said to be one of the rarest annual plants in North America, is also found in the region.

"It's a really nice continuous swath of very high-value habitat there," Mr. Feeney said. "That's why it was compelling enough for the state trust to put money into it."

Because Midland adheres to the concepts of "stewardship of land and sense of place and living in harmony with nature," the Land Trust says it can count on them to protect it.

"It's a really big decision to put your land permanently into conservation," said Mr. Feeney, noting that there have been sporadic talks with Midland about an easement since 1990. "They still have a cattle lease. It won't change anything, except they agree not to subdivide and develop."

Mr. Graham said given the pressures of encroaching development, "the time was right to make a stand to preserve this. We took this as an opportunity."

By selling the easement, the school will create funds for its endowment, allowing it to continue its scholarship programs. Tuition is \$35,000 a year, and 42 percent of the school's 90 students receive financial aid, Mr. Graham noted.

"In this economy, to raise that kind of capital is difficult," he said. "This is a long-sighted view. The board of trustees is taking responsibility for the long-term success of the school."

Midland also retains the right to one future home site and the right to subdivide that parcel with the home. If it is sold, however, keeping the easement is part of the requirements of sale, Mr. Feeney said.

Much of the land surrounding the main campus area is open to the public for hiking, though registration at the school is required.

Mr. Feeney acknowledged that some might find fault with the state spending such money during a time of financial crisis, but the grant funds came from voter-approved state bonds.

Santa Barbara resident Barry Schuyler graduated from Midland in 1941, served on its faculty from 1951 to 1959 and was a board member for several decades afterward. He and his wife, Jean, were instrumental in the easement process, school officials and Mr. Feeney said.

"When I was on the board, we always used to worry we'd get some hotshot people on the board who wanted to create a guest ranch or hotel," Mr. Schuyler recalled. "One of the great strengths of Midland is the wild, untouched oak savannah for kids to camp, ride and hike on. We just wanted to preserve it. We didn't want to see it lost. There's so little of it."

School founder Paul Squibb paid some \$25 per acre for the original purchase, Mr. Schuyler recalled, adding that his own parents "gave" him four acres in his name as a graduation present.

"I've spent many happy hours wandering over that land," he said.

Mr. Schuyler said nothing was more important to Mr. Squibb than the land.

"It's marvelous country that will stay essentially unchanged," Mr. Schuyler said.

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