



## Transcript of Video Interview with Meredith McCarthy & Leslie Mintz recorded August 2005.

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit [www.earthalert.org](http://www.earthalert.org).

### Interview with Meredith McCarthy & Leslie Mintz re Environmental Education

JB: Welcome viewers to *Heroes of the Coast*. This is a program that brings you the personal stories of people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the California coast for the rest of us. I'm happy to welcome today two of the staff members from Heal the Bay who have had extraordinary roles in bringing education about the coast to the public at large and California school children—Leslie Mintz and Meredith McCarthy.

We're going to start with you, Meredith, about all the different ways in which Heal the Bay helps educate the public about coastal issues.

MM: We have some incredible programs starting with our speakers bureau program where we train people in the spring and the fall. We send them through ten hours of very thorough training about sewage system, about the storm drain system, about those that can make a difference. And after they go through this training, they're able to then go back out into the community to Lions Clubs and schools and churches, and anyone who will welcome us. And we spend a lot of time in the community. We talk to about 23,000 people a year. It's really exciting. And my favorite is the third graders who write you back and they pledge their lives to the environment. They're happy to be your best friend. So it's so heartwarming really to see these kids and these are kids from all over the county—Compton, Watts, Southgate—they're so eager to help. "What can I do?" And so you connect them to their storm drain system, "so you can protect these animals, just by cleaning up your neighborhood." And all the light bulbs go on. It's quite rewarding.

JB: How long has this program been running?

MM: This program has been going almost since the start of Heal the Bay, actually. It's one of our oldest programs. So it's been handed down. It's evolved. The issues have evolved certainly, but we seem to be water quality awareness, watershed education. It's interesting that watershed is such a new concept really. When you ask someone in school now what a watershed is, that's not really a familiar term, so it's exciting to me to connect the top of the watershed all the way down to the coast, so that's exciting.

JB: How many volunteers are involved in that?

MM: We have about 50 volunteers who are involved in that and we use them on Coastal Cleanup Day, which is just past, which is always the third Saturday in September, where we bring...this year we had 10,300 people come...

JB: 10,300?

MM: We had 61 sites all over the county and people came and with their families and their church groups, and their corporate office, and it was 19,000 pounds of trash and recycleables. So it's just incredible. And what's beautiful about Coastal Cleanup Day is that people come to the beach thinking they're going to do a good deed and participate and do their part, but through our speakers bureau program, there's somebody there who actually can connect some dots for them. It's very important that picking up these tiny styrene pieces and cigarette butts, because it has such a huge impact, and once you connect them to that bigger picture, they're very, it's like, "okay, let's start!" It's exciting.

And we have a program called QVC (sp?), where we train teachers with a whole curriculum package. So they come for Saturday. They get some more information and they get trained on how to use this curriculum. We give them the curriculum and then they go back, work the curriculum with their students, and they then get to bring a whole field trip to one of our partnering aquariums, either the Santa Monica Pier aquarium, the Redondo SeaLab, the Manhattan Beach Roundhouse or Cabrillo. So they not only get the experience in the classroom, but then they get to come to the beach and dig in the sand and really have that full experience, so...

JB: Is that something like a two-day program?

MM: It's actually one day...the teacher works the curriculum however it fits into their regular curriculum, science or math or social studies, however they can apply it. It's all to California state standards, so it's a nice program.

JB: It incorporates the regular learning that they're required to be involved in.

MM: Absolutely.

JB: And then you developed all those programs?

MM: Definitely. Absolutely. It's a fantastic program. And they see, I believe, an additional 13,000 students to go through that program as well.

JB: What grade?

MM: It's K-5. So...

JB: Obviously you have different curriculums for the different age groups.

MM: Absolutely.

JB: So it's very complex.

MM: It is, it's very complex. But it's fantastic and that's just in a very small way incorporating environmental education. Leslie is going to talk about a much bigger way that we're working on that. But we also have the Adopt-a-Beach program, where your company, or your club can adopt

a beach. And basically you agree to clean it up three times and you get a big certificate from the state and it's a wonderful...

JB: What do they actually do?

MM: They come down. We meet them there. We give them a sort of orientation and some safety information and again connect why it's important that they're there. It's not just "these few pieces of Styrofoam." It's this much bigger picture. It starts back where they live—that storm drain, that catch-basis in front of their house, you know, and for most people, they think that's a sewage system, or it goes somewhere and somebody's taking care of it, so it's nice to be able to put some pieces together certainly for them.

JB: Now are they doing like cleaning up the beach throughout the year? That's not just one day?

MM: Whenever it's convenient. After school, Saturday morning, Sunday morning, after church, wherever....

JB: And do you find that they take ownership of this after they've...

MM: Absolutely.

JB: Even after the three times, they keep doing it.

MM: Yes. We often see groups come back and participate in Coastal Cleanup Day, which is exciting. And then we have our "Month in the Sand" (sp?), which is our monthly beach clean-up, every third Saturday of the month we have...enjoy...usually we have about 100 to 150 people come down every month. We've just made it, a dedicated, beautiful souls, what we've made our family commitment to do, and so it's from 10 to noon always the third Saturday, so very busy.

JB: Very very busy. And you coordinate all that?

MM: I play a big role in each of those separate programs has a manager, but we certainly work together. We sort of combined one of the Cities to the Sea, Adopt-a-Beach and Speakers Bureau in a new program that we're calling Cities to the Sea so that an inland community gets to take full advantage of these kind of programs. It's not just for the beach communities certainly.

JB: Tell me more about that. That's very interesting.

MM: The Compton Creek sp? Watershed is an inland watershed that all communities—Watts, Willowbrook, Florence, Firestone, Southgate, Lynwood, Compton—all drain to Compton Creek. And then Compton Creek drains to the Los Angeles River and of course, the Los Angeles River drains down through the San Pedro Bay in Long Beach. So it's connecting these communities which are mostly traditionally underserved. Organizations like ours haven't gotten to them in the past. You know it's up watershed, it's inland. And now we're realizing that these communities are so welcoming and so eager to get this information. It's been incredible.

JB: Typically, who do you deal with?

MM: Schools, organizations. Places such as Compton, there's hundreds of organizations, social justice organizations for the most part, not necessarily environmental. Grassroots.

JB: You're not going to the mayor's office.

MM: We're doing that as well. We're coming out at [unintelligible] We just did our coastal education day, which was the Friday beforehand. We got 20 schools from that watershed to the beach and for the most part, I would say about 75 percent of the kids had never been to the beach. So just walking in the sand was a joy, because they'd never been. And these kids live 18 miles away, and so it was beautiful. And in some of those communities, we're organizing litter cleanups.

JB: Were they fearful at all, entering the water?

MM: Just joy. Tried to get some photos of that.

JB: One of these days we're going to have to get down and videotape. That would be wonderful.

MM: And it's interesting that sometimes I find that the school kids in the Compton Creek watershed...they're not used to it. It's not something they see every day. So it's even more of an incredible experience. The kids in Malibu and Santa Monica, they're used to it. But the kids in Lynwood and Southgate, they just light up when you talk about whales and dolphins and the coast.

JB: Well, dolphins and whales were my point of entry into environmental activism, so I know how powerful that bond is between these mammals that live in the sea.

MM: Sharks are a big deal also. The Great White Sharks, a lack of love for that shark. Always exciting. Even though they're a little scared, but they so much love the idea of it.

JB: Leslie, let's talk about what you have done, are doing, are going to be doing. How did you come into this whole picture?

LM: Well, Heal the Bay has taken these incredible sort of pioneering community inland efforts and the growth of Coastal Cleanup Day, Adopt-a-Beach and expertise in the education on the ground that Meredith and others have developed over the last several years and we expanded it to some statewide legislation that was passed in 2004. That is the "Education and Environment Initiative," otherwise known to those of us in the business as the EEI, and that particular law—it is a law—it was signed by Governor Davis actually, is now in its first couple years of implementation. And just a few weeks ago, Governor Schwarzenegger (sp?) signed a follow-up piece of education to 801721, sponsored by the Administration to fund the first phase of the Education and Environment Initiative. And so we have received \$7 million over two years to work with the state, lots of stakeholders, to develop curricula. And it's going to be different things for different grades, because the special thing about the EEI is it allows for the State

Board of Education to approve environmental education curricula in every grade, in every discipline. So it landmark legislation in that regard. So it is potentially a national model for the United States, because it is... California is poised to be at the crest of this environmental education wave that we are praying to sweep the nation before it's too late. And we think that this will be a great opportunity also for the state to start developing public/private partnerships in environmental legislation, because Heal the Bay... nonprofit... the nonprofit community has traditionally been the vanguard of environmental legislation and I think as the state builds its capacity to go out and tell the districts and the teachers and help them to do professional development to use the curricula, they're going to need the assistance of people like Meredith and other nonprofits in those respective communities. So we're very hopeful that at the end of the next five to seven years of implementation, that we won't just have textbooks with environmental education, we won't just have teachers who understand how to use those books, but that we will have schools that have relationships with environmental education nonprofits in their communities, so that kids go out to the beach and allow them to do hands-on community....

JB: That's what it takes. That's what makes it real.

LM: And EEI is the first step. It doesn't get us all the way there, but it does institutionalize environmental education for the first time in California and the nation. So we're beginning....

JB: California can still be pretty radical.

LM: We're developing the curricula and there's going to be a call for all kinds of writers and consultants and then after that, we will be seeking the assistance of private foundations and industry, academic institutions and others to help pay for the implementation in the schools, so a lot of teachers to be trained, for instructional plans to be rewritten and things of that nature. So it's a multi-year process. It's a long term project, but it's very highly leveraged and it's an incredible opportunity that we're hoping to use our expertise in on regional and local programs and then help import it into the school systems, the public school systems.

JB: And when you say environmental education, of course, we know that environment really touches every aspect of our lives, and so the subject material will be very broad.

LM: Absolutely.

JB: Can you begin to elaborate on how...some examples.

LM: I think there are going to be different people in different disciplines who bring expertise to bear. The EEI original legislation incorporated 14 different mandatory subject areas—ocean, air, water, agriculture, including environmental justice and environmental health. So there is a broad umbrella to cover and we're taking expertise of experts in those areas to help make sure that it's fully fleshed out. I think that a focus of this effort is going to make sure that gaps in current academic standards are covered. For example, Meredith mentioned the concept of a watershed. Although that's somewhat present in current academic content standards—science standards for the State of California—there isn't an awful lot about it. There isn't information about how water is treated before you have to drink it. Children are not taught the concept of conservation. In

history, for example, they're required by the content standards to learn about the grizzly bear on the California flag, but they're never required to be taught that it's been extinct in California for 45 years. So things like that where there are gaps in knowledge that will help children make informed choices about their impact on the environment and become stewards, energy conservation, things like global warming and climate change, water conservation, those kinds of concepts are not traditionally highlighted, if at all present in the current standards, and hopefully our curriculum will begin to supplement those gaps.

JB: Now did you face any opposition in getting this passed, where people would say, for example, "Oh, there's no global warming?"

LM: We did. We had irate people, we had death threats. We had legislative poison pills, we had under-the-table back-room stabbings. We had every kind of bureaucratic roadblock you could imagine.

JB: Could you give us an example?

LM: I think the most important take away is to acknowledge that the state education system is overburdened as it is. I think that is a legitimate issue. Understandably, they view things like enviro education as a voodoo science. And they feel that teachers are overburdened. And they can't possibly add more to the plate. And if you want to teach environmental education here then are you going to be required to teach this particular part of history over there. So there's legitimate concern there. But what we did is we said that we are going to teach this in the context of other academic content standards, so that we will teach existing standards to mastery so that students perform well on tests and will learn the fundamentals. So this provides a context. It doesn't give a whole new set of material necessarily that teachers have to take on and we're also going to provide assistance. We're developing a planning process over the next year and a half for what exactly that assistance will look like, whether it will be stipends, what kind of professional science training we will help provide. But we're not going to just slam the book on the table and say, "go do it!" We're going to be behind them every step of the way.

MM: I think it's so important. The word "environment" has sort of been stolen.

JB: Well, in certain places, we were told you should not use the word "environment."

MM: It's funny. For a lot of people, environment...at least what we're discovering in inland communities, environment means "nature." And at first, they'd say, "well, there's no nature here. There's not even a park here, so you can take your environmental message and go somewhere where there's nature." And it's fantastic, interesting to be able to take back the environment, the built environment, the environment here is all concrete, so how do you talk about community health in this built-concrete environment? And it is everywhere. It is everything. It is all of us and one of the things that I think is fantastic is that it's in every subject.

JB: Okay, there are some that are obvious. Now the science ones...chemistry, biology, that's easy. History even. How do you work it into some of the other subjects, like English? Writing? Philosophy?

LM: That's a fair question. In order to get the curriculum commission and the State Board of Education to approve these materials, and unless materials are approved in schools, they really won't be taught. [unintelligible] But approval is important so it's not considered supplemental. In order to get these materials approved, we have to within a range stick to the current academic content standards, which are something we originally tried to change, but that was anathema, so we did our legislation a slightly different way. But suffice to say, the things like English language, I think the important thing is to make sure that children have a selection of texts that have environmental contexts. For example, high schoolers might read a book that Meredith has been extolling the virtues of "Cradle to Cradle." Preschoolers might read "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss. So it's not that they would necessarily not learn the fundamentals of reading and writing, it's just that it would have an appropriate context. For mathematics, very similar, because you cannot teach the Pathagorean (SP?) theorem by learning environmental concepts. You can use mathematical examples that incorporate the environment, but that perhaps is not as truly connected to environmental education as science is, as history is. So I think that's why the curriculum would be different things for different grades. And we undertook an extensive one-and-a-half year mapping process to current standards to make sure the material was aligned. Meredith mentioned that Heal the Bay's materials are aligned to current academic content standards. That's very important for schools to actually use the material, and ironically and unfortunately, most nonprofits don't have the knowledge and expertise to make sure some of the great stuff they put together is dev eloped in that format. And hopefully this bill at a future date will address that lack of knowledge and help build capacity in the environmental community on how to do that.

MM: We [unintelligible] present day activity guide that was just produced and one of the first things that I said is they now have to write the standard on the board of what they're teaching that day, and so it's one of those things that unless...I mean, they don't have time in their day to go through and find standards for some of this already great fabulous curriculum, so if we can meet them halfway, then it's much more likely to be used.

LM: You have to deal with the bureaucratic reality, the administrative reality of where California's educational system is at. So we're trying to work with that and push the envelope within that framework.

JB: We're down to the last couple minutes of the program, and can you give me a couple of examples of people you see who have come through the whole process of Heal the Bay as young people and are now becoming engaged in this work as young adults?

MM: Santa Monica High School is just down the street and they have some of those kids who were doing programs through their grammar school are now are in the Surf Club and the Surf Club has adopted the beach and they also just went through our crew high school training program, which is where we train the high school students to be beach captains for our big cleanups and it's great to see those kids, over the course of time, making full circle, and now they are the teachers, and it's a beautiful thing to watch certainly.

JB: Final thoughts, Leslie?

LM: It's an exciting opportunity and we're very fortunate and we intend to make the most of it with our local programs, as we have been.

MM: It's our 20<sup>th</sup> year.

JB: I'm so proud of the work of Heal the Bay. You have a tremendous, large, powerful organization that brings all of this awareness to, well, thousands of people a year, thousands and thousands a year.

MM: One of the things we tell the children is that one woman, Dorothy Green, made a difference. And you can make a difference, too. And will you help me? And they all raise their hands.

JB: Well, thank you both very much for joining me. Viewers, we invite you to participate in Heal the Bay. You can get a great deal more information about what Heal the Bay does by going to the website—[healthebay.org](http://healthebay.org)—or you can call 800-HEALBAY. And for more information about Earth Alert it's [www.earthalert.org](http://www.earthalert.org). Thank you very very much for being with us and we invite you to come back another time for stories of Heroes of the Coast, and my congratulations to Heal the Bay for spawning heroes of the coast.

[end of interview]