

# LOCAL HEROES

## BETTY FOSTER

*Editor's note: On Dec. 18, 1997 Boise Weekly published our annual Local Heroes issue. Among those selected to be profiled was Betty Foster. Because she was out of town between the time we received nominations and the date we had committed to publishing, however, we were unable to include her in that issue.*



Photo by Ken Schneider

In the fall of 1993, Betty Foster was desperate. It had been almost three years since she and many others in the East End Neighborhood Association had started a fight to save a chunk of open space that sits in the hills above Warm Springs Avenue from becoming a housing development, and the sixty-something former librarian had begun to wonder whether all the meetings, the planning, the headaches, would be for nothing.

"I was at my lowest point," Foster says, "I really didn't know if it was going to happen."

What did happen was hardly dramatic, at least at first — she was mailed a catalogue.

The mailing was from Gallery 601, which would often send Foster notices about the availability of new prints by Bev Doolittle, a favorite artist of Foster's whose work often depicted Native American themes. "She came out with a new print," says Foster, "I looked at that print and I thought, 'My god we're going to do it, it's going to happen. I got goose bumps.'"

The print, entitled "Prayer for the Wild Things," now sits in Foster's kitchen. About 10 yards away, in her dining room, is a photograph of Castle Rock, the "it" of which Foster speaks so passionately, a mirror image essentially, of the landscape portrayed in Doolittle's illustration.

While other obstacles would follow in the fight to save the land, Foster never again doubted the importance of her task. And in early 1996, six years and several close calls after the Morningside Heights housing development first threatened the 84-acre parcel that includes an outcropping of rock sacred to both the Shoshone Bannock and Shoshone Paiute

nations, Castle Rock was successfully spared.

Unlike many of those spurned to action when land-use and development issues hit close to home, Foster was not an entirely unlikely activist before the Castle Rock fight began. Raised in Minot, N.D., she moved with her husband John to Boise in 1957, after he was hired to work here by the Upjohn Company. A year later they moved into their home on the city's east end, where they still live today.

In 1959, she began a 30-year career as a librarian at North Junior High, a position she says she still often misses. "Many mornings I went to work and thought, 'I can't believe I'm getting paid for this.'... I was really truly lucky to be involved," she says. "I don't miss getting up at 5:15 in the morning, but I do miss the kids."

In the summer of 1989, she took early retirement. Almost immediately, she got involved in local politics for the Ada County Democrats — something she didn't have the time or inclination to do while working at the school. "You know you can't be too politically involved when you're with the school district," she says. "... I feel real strongly that everybody is responsible, and when people complain about the government, they are the government ... I felt like I had the responsibility because I had the time after I was retired to do the things I couldn't do when I was working."

Less than a year later, in 1990, she and her neighbors learned about Morningside Heights, a proposed housing development that would affect 84 acres of land just north of their neighborhood. "The East End Neighborhood Association did not think was a good idea," she says. "There were problems with school overcrowding, drainage and geologi-

cal problems, and then the fact that it was an area used by Native Americans was really troubling."

After four years of meetings and negotiations — with everyone from the city council to the planning and zoning committee to the state land board — the E.E.N.A., the developer, the city of Boise and the Shoshone Bannocks and Shoshone Paiutes negotiated an agreement. After the city put up the down payment, the association would be allowed to purchase 50 acres of the land, while the developer would build on the remaining 34 acres.

Even then, the deal was not secured. The E.E.N.A. would have to come up with \$75,000 — \$35,000 in 1995 and \$40,000 by January 1996 — to guarantee the sale. But in December 1995, with less than three weeks remaining before the \$40,000 balance was due, the association had little more than \$13,000. "I was getting a little panicky," says Foster. "All of a sudden, it just seemed that people came together. I was on the phone continuously. We received an anonymous gift of \$5,000, then a gentlemen in Boise donated \$5,000, then the Shoshone Bannock, at the very last minute, donated \$5,000. It was amazing. Even after we reached our goal, people still kept calling."

Now, almost two years after the final payment was made, Foster's eyes still light up when she talks about it, saying she was just lucky to be a part of the whole thing. "I was introduced to a whole new culture, and we made wonderful friends, people that will be lifelong friends," she says. "We gained more than 50 acres of land."

—Andrew Putz