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Jean Auer Award Recipient

State of the Estuary Conference

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Thank you, Carl, for that introduction, and for the work you have done for the Estuary.

Thank you, to the Committee, for this great honor. Thank you, to my wife Teresa, for her partnership and love, and to my parents, who are here today, for their love and support.

And thank you to all of my colleagues, and there are so many of you! Without you none of what Carl described could have occurred. While the spotlight for the moment is on me, when the camera zooms out it will be clear I am standing on the shoulders of many talented collaborators.

When I first received the news of the Committee's decision, I was speechless. Now I know that me being speechless is not something that any of you have any experience with, so you'll have to take my word for it.

Having something to say in almost every situation is a characteristic that I believe Jean Auer and I shared. My professional career only briefly overlapped with Jean's, as we were both involved in early days of SFEP. Of course, I was a young scientist just out of graduate school, while Jean had already completed terms on the State Water Resources Control Board, the San Francisco Bay and Central Coast Regional Boards, and as Mayor of Hillsborough.

I definitely recall the respect that she commanded, and there is no doubt of her impact on the Estuary. Indeed, we all stand today on Jean's shoulders.

Jean's effectiveness had many sources, but an essential one was that she had a vision of what was right and important. She kept this vision in her mind, always seeking to approach it as she performed the relentless duties of a career.

And now, 30 years after I met Jean, I have also performed the relentless duties of a career. Duties that sometimes seemed mundane and unimportant. But I now know that if you do a little bit every day, you have the chance to accomplish a lot.

In 1986, my colleagues and I developed an estimate of the amount of copper pollution flowing to San Francisco Bay. Since then, our region has acted so effectively that the Bay is now no longer impaired due to copper.

Was I confident this would happen when I was documenting our copper pollution problem? No, I was not.

At the 2001 State of the Estuary conference I said "Those of us who study the Bay on a regular basis owe our fellow citizens, who don't have the time or training to delve into our technical reports, a straightforward answer to the question "is the health of the Bay getting better or worse?" Did I know that we would work for the next ten years to create the State of the Estuary report?

No, I did not. I had doubts that these goals could be achieved.

Yet, despite my doubts, we achieved these goals. This happened because people persevered, stayed engaged, stayed true to their vision that a healthy estuary in the heart of our metropolis contributes to our quality of life, and to the lives of those who will follow us.

We achieved these goals because people remembered the lessons from previous generations of leaders; leaders like Sylvia McLaughlin, Robert Sibley, William Kent, and Jean Auer.

And let's not kid ourselves; extraordinary changes are coming. Given the conservative nature of the scientific enterprise, it is my expectation that our climate will change more quickly than currently projected. More frequent droughts, floods and wildfires, accelerating sea level rise, and rising extreme temperatures are obviously in our future.

We have the capacity to build our resilience to these coming changes, but only if all of us accept this as our goal. Now is not the time to be timid; to take the easy road of throwing up our hands and saying it's complicated. Now is the time for boldness, innovation, and learning from our inevitable mistakes. The world we get will be the world we choose to work towards today.

Nothing will reflect more poorly upon us than the evidence that we did not take bold action when it was necessary.

We are the caretakers of a jewel. The Bay provides us with so much. Despite the ecosystem services that we obtain, such as waste assimilation, flood protection, or commercial fisheries, for me it is the aesthetic wonder of the estuary that never leaves my mind and my heart. The estuary provides a consistent edge, both physically and symbolically, that prevents us from being engulfed by urbanization. It is a provider of a calm perspective; of the big view, the long view. And this is what we now need to muster, as a region. The long view.

We must change, we can change, and if we all continue to work toward our vision we will change. Some might despair when faced with the fact that what we need to accomplish is like nothing we've ever seen. To them I would reply with words I spoke at this conference in 2001, words I borrowed from Kai Lee. "Just because something is beyond our experience does not mean it is beyond our capabilities."

We know we are capable of great things; our region reflects what we can accomplish when we hold the long view in our hearts and minds. The time has arrived for us to choose our path towards a resilient future. I see our prosperity on the path that retains a healthy estuary as a defining component of the Bay Area.