

The Story of SCVN: How It All Began

— As told by David Lazaroff

On a Monday morning in January 1977, David Lazaroff, a former high school teacher and National Park Service naturalist recently arrived from California, reported for duty at the Sabino Canyon Visitor Center. There he was met by his new boss, Robert Barnacastle (Barney), chief of Visitor Information Services for the Santa Catalina Ranger District, who drove him in a Forest Service pickup to the end of the road for a first look at Sabino Canyon. The two hit it off immediately. It was the beginning of a fruitful partnership and a decades-long friendship.

David had been hired with what was then an unusual title: Environmental Education Specialist. His chief task was intended to be running workshops for teachers, using educational materials that had been created by the Forest Service for use nationwide. However, David soon perceived an educational opportunity of another kind, tailored specifically to the beautiful and fascinating environment of Sabino Canyon. He imagined children arriving regularly at the canyon and being led by knowledgeable volunteers on nature walks and in “hands-on” educational activities. David described his idea to Barney, who unhesitatingly offered his support and participation.

In 1977 the Visitor Center was a much smaller building than today, and there were already a few volunteers helping out at the reception desk. With additional training, these and others became the pioneers who staffed a pilot program for children in the spring of 1978. Teachers and children loved it. The following fall, David and Barney recruited and trained 15 more volunteers, and the school field trip program was off and running.

As the program grew in popularity, it became clear that some of the activities being enjoyed by children would appeal as well to adult visitors to Sabino Canyon. In 1982 a few volunteers began meeting the general public for opportunities such as gold panning. This was the beginning of the “adult interpretation” part of today’s volunteer program.

By this time the national political winds were shifting, and the Forest Service was becoming less hospitable to educational pursuits. The situation was exacerbated by competition within the agency for diminishing funds. Sensing that their days with the Forest Service were numbered, David and Barney worked hard to ensure that the educational programs at Sabino Canyon would continue without them. They were joined in this effort by Steve Plevel, who had been responsible for creating the position for which David had originally been hired and who was then District Ranger for the Santa Catalina district.

These were difficult times. Fortunately, Sabino Canyon’s volunteers had both the desire and the determination to run the educational programs themselves. A group of dedicated volunteers began meeting at the home of Norma Niblett to draw up by-laws for a self-governing organization. The Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists came into being, Norma became their first president, and the group has thrived ever since.

David and Barney did lose their positions with the Forest Service. Steve eventually retired. All three remain proud of their parts in creating and sustaining the Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists.