

# EMPIRE NEWS

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ANNIE WELLS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Susan Brandt-Hawley with husband, Bill Hawley, and son, Zane, enjoy a rolling, green vista.

## Environmentalists' dragon slayer

### Lawyer takes on the giants

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Correspondent

GLEN ELLEN — Susan Brandt-Hawley's house, high in the Mayacamas Mountains, may symbolize the environmental attorney's view of modern life.

The house could have been built a few dozen feet away, for a spectacular view of distant highways, subdivisions, and the misty

towers of San Francisco shimmering on the horizon.

Instead, she and her husband, Bill Hawley, turned their backs on the urban sprawl and built their home facing the peaceful vineyards and forests to the northeast, where at night not a single light can be seen.

"I've been introduced as someone who's loved and hated in Sonoma County, and my work is controversial," says Brandt-Hawley.

"I don't always agree with my clients, but I'm certainly identified with them. And where we

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ACTIVIST HELEN LIBEU

live does contribute to a feeling of being close to the earth. But I have a car and I drive a lot, and I can't be real self-righteous about being environmentally correct."

But with more environmental battles waged in the courtroom than under the open sky, Brandt-Hawley's name pops up constantly in local legal lore.

Brandt-Hawley, 39, has defended vernal pools and woodlands and endangered daisies. She's helped save everything from the historic Guerneville bridge, to the tiny "Sonoma Sunshine" wildflower.

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er, to looming redwoods in Mendocino County. And she's fought David-vs.-Goliath battles against such giants as Hewlett-Packard, Louisiana-Pacific and the state government.

"She's a dragon slayer," says longtime environmental activist Helen Libeu of Santa Rosa, who has worked with Brandt-Hawley on cases involving the Laguna de Santa Rosa and Mendocino forests.

Equally important, Libeu adds, "Susan is interested in her cases but she's not a wild-eyed zealot. Environmental clients are always dying for their cause and they want their lawyer to die, too."

Former Sebastopol Mayor Anne Magnie says she first encountered Brandt-Hawley when the attorney "whipped the pants off" city officials by winning a lawsuit claiming they shouldn't have approved the controversial Palm Terrace subdivision without an environmental impact report.

"She obviously had done the research and the groundwork and the homework — and we lost," Magnie says.

Bill Hawley is more outspoken than his wife about the local environment. "It just boggles my mind that this county has grown the way it has," he says. "It's just gone a-pe, and it really disappoints me. I've kind of written Sonoma County off — you can do pretty much anything you want if you have the money."

But Brandt-Hawley says firmly:

"I disagree with that. Bill's more of a pessimist than I am. I still love Sonoma County, and I respect the planning. Growth is critical, but I think it can be controlled."

She and Bill, who's a poet and winegrower, live with their two sons, Emile, 12, and Zane, 5, on their ranch and vineyards, "Random Ridge." It sprawls across 40 mountainous acres straddling Sonoma and Napa counties, 2,300 feet above sea level east of Glen Ellen.

"We pioneered the property," Bill says proudly. "This wasn't a white-shoe operation."

In fact, Random Ridge is reached only by two miles of dirt road, ending in gate-posts engraved with totem-like animals by Petaluma sculptor Mary Fuller. A 15-foot teepee graces the front yard and may end up as the kids' play-room; nearby is a lush vegetable garden and Sequoia redwoods the couple planted.

Electricity is still a hoarded luxury because PG&E hasn't reached the ranch yet; the nearest power-pole is two miles away. In the family's first four years in the house, in fact, they relied on kerosene lamps and candles, and cooked on a wood-burning stove. Propane was added in 1984, and solar panels and television arrived for the first time only last year.

Born in Washington state, Brandt-Hawley grew up as an Air Force kid whose family roamed the country. "I went to 13 different schools before graduating from college," she says.

She, nonetheless, enjoyed "really a great childhood. My parents were always very supportive of me, and gave me a lot of courage and the self-confidence that I could do anything I set my mind to."

Having dabbled in poetry and prose, she originally hoped to write for a living. That's why she majored in philosophy and minored in creative writing before graduating, Phi Beta Kappa, from San Diego State University in 1973.

"Studying philosophy and studying law are somewhat related," she notes. "I'm a voracious reader, and I like to argue and figure things out."

Eventually she was steered toward law school. After graduating from the University of California, Davis, law school in 1977, she worked at the San Quentin prison law office.

In 1979, she launched her Glen Ellen law office, now housed in a tree-shaded, brick structure built 85 years ago. A huge colorful quilt adorns one interior wall, along with crayon sketches by her kids and a photo of a grim "clear-cut" of timber in Mendocino County.

The office is undeniably homey. One back room, for instance, belongs to the kids and contains a day-bed, TV, VCR and bicycles. Nearby is a washer and dryer where — since the solar power back home isn't enough to run the machines — Brandt-Hawley washes the family's socks and shirts between bouts of legal research on her computer.

Clients weren't far away in the early days. In one of her first cases, she represented Glen Ellen residents who wanted to stop a shopping center planned for the vacant lot right across the road.

With her help, the center was never built. Ironically, a contro-

versial new grocery store is now planned there.

Her first widely publicized case came in 1981, when Hewlett-Packard was planning its new facility near Sonoma State University. Brandt-Hawley again represented a citizens' group, and the month-long trial was "heavily scrutinized. We lost the trial on the court level, but settled on appeal" a few years later.

Ultimately, in fact, the company reduced the complex to about a fifth of its original size.

Word spread, and now nearly all Brandt-Hawley's work is environmentally related. In 1988, for instance, she won the lawsuit against Sebastopol for approving new homes near vernal pools without enough study, and she's now working on a similar case in Sonoma.

She also represents the Airport Action Coalition — yet another citizens' group — that has sued the county, claiming it needed an environmental report before allowing flights by WestAir between Santa Rosa and Los Angeles.

In the past decade, Brandt-Hawley has helped stop an eight-story, wood-burning power plant being planned near downtown Cloverdale, halt logging in spotted owl territory and save the old Guerneville bridge from demolition by the state.

She currently represents groups opposed to extensive gravel mining in the Russian River and to the destruction of the Rosenberg's department store in downtown Santa Rosa.