I felt like a proud parent after Barney Mann, Liz Bergeron and others finished presenting their reports to the Annual Meeting last April. After all, the PCTA was a nascent but immature organization when I assumed the position of executive director in 1996. Sixteen years later it is thriving and mature, bursting with energy and hope.

The passion brought to the trail from the 1930s through the 1950s by pioneers Clinton Clarke and Warren Rogers had lived on in the likes of Louise Marshall, Larry Cash and others. But by the 1990s they were getting on in years, and looking to others to carry the torch. There wouldn’t have been any tween years without their vision and tenacity.

By 1993, Dr. Ben York had taken over the mantle of leadership. With the best of intentions and a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, he had convinced the board of directors to hire the organization’s first paid employee. Unfortunately, that arrangement didn’t accomplish its purpose, and by 1995, spirits were waning.

An infusion of new blood on the board turned despair to hope. The board adopted a strategic plan, and would hire a full-time executive director. Alan Young, the primary author of the plan and an early thru-hiker, led the search committee. Through a circumstance I consider an act of God, they selected me for the job.

I had hiked High Sierra segments of the PCT as a teenage Explorer scout. But I’d spent my adult life as a member of the Boy Scouts of America professional staff and as a fundraising consultant to nonprofit groups working to rehabilitate inner city neighborhoods. I had no experience with trail organizations. This was going to be an adventure.

At the PCTA, I found that Ben, Pete Fish, Curtis Hardie, Hal Culp, Laraine Downer, Lee Terkelsen and other volunteers shared a vision and desire but lacked the experience to grow the organization to the next level. It was going to be up to me to apply the skills learned in my 31-year career to harness and direct their energy. Easier said than done!

Though I had been selected in the fall of 1995, the Forest Service grant to pay me didn’t start until May. So while winding down my consulting work, I worked part time getting to know PCTA board members and gathering as much information about the association as I could.

What a great group of dedicated men and women. By midsummer 1996, we had developed and adopted a new membership and benefits program and set a fundraising goal of $112,000 for the year, of which $57,000 was already raised from our new Trail Guardian Club and the Forest Service grant. We also set a goal to increase membership from 800 to 5,000 in five years.

By late September, the enormity of the job had caught up with me and I was beginning to run ragged. Membership was at 1,481, but fundraising needed more of my attention. I needed someone who was intimately familiar with the trail and could do more of the membership and constituency-relations work.

By year’s end, we had raised enough money to hire Joe Sobinovsky, a 1995 PCT and former Appalachian Trail thru-hiker. Finally, I had someone who “owned” the trail, knew it like the back of his hand and could communicate with our hiker constituency. Together, we began to work on that seemingly impossible membership goal.
By year’s end, membership had grown to 3,079. The year 1999 was one of joy and anger for me personally. My wife and I had purchased land the previous year for an eventual retirement home in the Carson Valley east of Lake Tahoe. Then she landed a job that required moving to Minden. For the next two years I camped out under my desk each night and went home on weekends.

David Fossey and Bob Nida joined me during Hike the Hill that year. A few weeks later, Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon authored an appropriation request cosigned by 14 members from both sides of the aisle. As a result, the Forest Service received $1.5 million for land acquisition to relocate the trail off the road in Agua Dulce. Once again, the PCTA was beginning to earn serious recognition for its work protecting the trail. We drafted or adopted policy statements relating to timber management, ski areas and mountain bike use on the trail. The millennium ended on a good note.

We Hiked the Hill again in 2000 and secured $3 million for land acquisition, $250,000 for a multiregional land acquisition team, $100,000 for a fulltime PCT manager’s position and increased overall funding for trail maintenance. By year’s end, the board had adopted a “Vision for Resource Management Along the PCT,” and we had received an unsolicited $50,000 grant from the southern California Wildlands Conservancy that recognized our achievements in the area of trail protection.

In 2001, as winter turned to spring, the PCTA had grown big and stronger. Membership topped 4,000, the number of trail projects and maintainers had grown exponentially, our advocacy efforts were paying off with more funding from Congress for land acquisition and maintenance, and the Forest Service turned to the PCTA for advice on which easements along the trail should receive priority for acquisition.

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For more information, contact Angie Williamson at (916) 285-1849 or awilliamson@pcta.org

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By May, I could feel the burnout and announced I would like to retire in October. In August, Liz Bergeron was selected for the position from a pool of 19 applicants. I couldn’t have been happier since I knew she would do an outstanding job.

So it was with great pleasure that I handed off the now mature PCTA to Liz in October 2001 and headed to British Columbia for a little vacation and to get reacquainted with my wife … and my life. It was a terrific run and a satisfying way to end my career in the nonprofit world. •

The workload increased to the point that the board approved the hiring of an administrative assistant and a person devoted to researching the threatened sections of the trail.

One of the most rewarding things I did that year was to work with hiker/photographer Bart Smith and authors Karen Berger and Dan Smith, to publish Ailing the Pacific Crest Trail, a magnificent coffeetable book. Hikers and would-be hikers were clamoring for a map of the entire trail, so when we received a $20,000 challenge cost-share grant from the Forest Service for that purpose, we sought and received funds to match the grant from Eugene “Bud” Reid and his wife.

The tragic death of a young couple run down along the trail by an errant motorist that fall was turned into hope with the establishment of the Jane & Flicka Memorial Fund, providing the seed money for an endowment fund. We received a $5,000 grant from Backpacker Magazine to purchase 10 trail crew kitchens, and after seeing what the PCTA was doing, the Coleman Company donated most of the items we needed without being asked. It was so fulfilling to see companies recognizing our hard work without having to beg for a grant.