

# Local Heroes 2014

By Indy Staff

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*The Santa Barbara Independent's* Annual Celebration of Good People

During the Thanksgiving week of 1986, The Santa Barbara Independent published its first issue ever, a roundup of the good-hearted and hardworking people that make the Santa Barbara community thrive. Every year since, we've continued that tradition, shining a bright light on those folks who've dedicated their time to improving the lives of others. Nearly 30 years later, we've yet to run out of Local Heroes — indeed, the hardest task of the year is whittling the list down — and we proudly present this year's roundup to you to enjoy during this week of giving thanks.



## Karen Lee Stevens: For the Love of Dogs and Reading

Paul Wellman

“It’s such a simple idea, but it has such profound results,” said Karen Lee Stevens of Animals + Reading = Fun! (ARF!), a program that brings therapy dogs to schools and libraries where children practice reading to them. “We help kids to get excited about reading, and because they are reading to a dog, a nonjudgmental listener, they get to practice and they are getting better,” she said.

ARF! falls under the umbrella of programs created by Stevens’s nonprofit All for Animals, which the native Santa Barbaran began as a monthly email in 1997 as a way to inform people of the mistreatment of animals. Inspired by her “soul kitty,” which she found stray in the rain outside a warehouse in Goleta, Stevens said, “I knew I had to do something. I started writing a newsletter and had at one point 6,000 people on the email list. It just grew and grew.”

Stevens’s organization continued to burgeon. In 2002, All for Animals incorporated as a full-fledged nonprofit; more than eight years ago, volunteers began going into area schools, teaching humane education to the youth. Two years ago, Stevens created the ARF! reading outreach, pairing with the Santa Barbara Public Library. “Our pilot program consisted of six teams for a 13-week program. It was a phenomenal success,” she said. “We actually tracked the children’s reading scores — reading fluency and comprehension — and they’ve made some remarkable gains .... It’s a two-pronged [program]: The kids get to practice their reading skills with a nonjudgmental listener, and they learn empathy and compassion for animals.” ARF! now consists of 25 certified teams, all taught by an All for Animals professional dog trainer, and are according to national therapy-dog standards.



Karen Stevens and Dog Sandy

“My life has really revolved around animals and reading — they have always been two of my favorite things,” Stevens explained. “One of the reasons why it’s so meaningful for me to go back into the Santa Barbara Public Library is because I was there every Saturday morning as a child.”

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