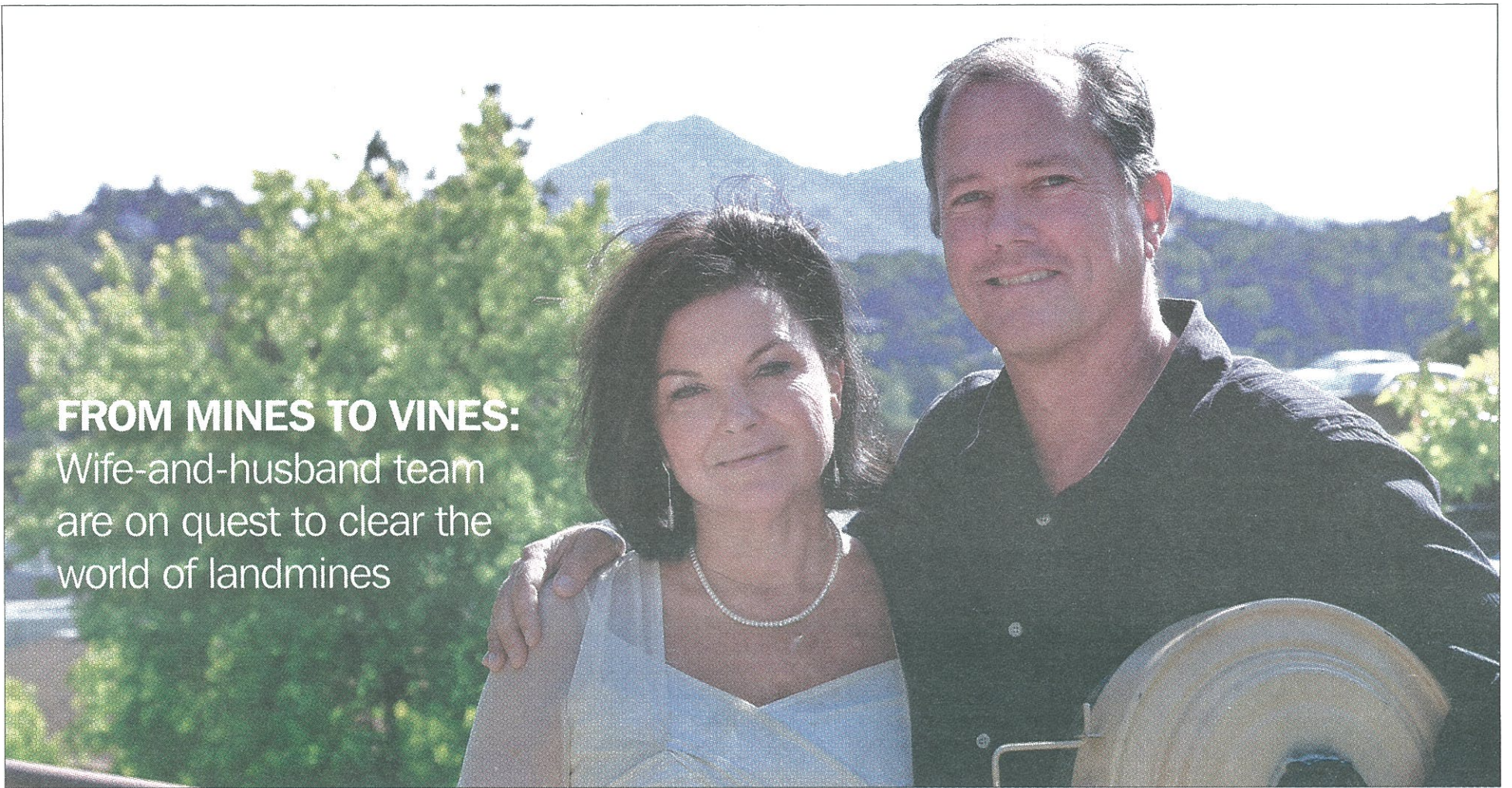


FROM MINES TO VINES:

Wife-and-husband team are on quest to clear the world of landmines



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

Heidi and Gary Kuhn run the San Rafael-based nonprofit Roots of Peace that removes landmines in post-conflict regions and sows sustainable agricultural programs. Gary holds a deactivated landmine.

By DOMINIQUE FARRELL

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It's not your typical love story.

Tiburon native Gary Kuhn met his wife, Heidi, a fifth-generation Marinite, on the ski slopes of Utah in 1977. Heidi says it was love at first sight. The couple married a few years later and went on to have four children.

But instead of settling into suburban bliss, the Kuhns have spent the past 18 years on a mission to rid the world of landmines and return the land to productive use.

Inspired by the late Princess Diana, who had used her fame to raise awareness about the problem of landmines, Heidi wanted to keep the issue in the forefront. Soon after Diana's death in 1997, Heidi raised a glass during an event and made a toast to transform "mines into vines."

"It was a catalytic moment in my life," Heidi says.

After surviving cancer, Heidi had given birth to her fourth child. Heidi considers herself fortunate. While she and her family can run along the beach and hike in the nearby mountains without the fear of landmines, thousands of others cannot.

"I feel a sense of responsibility to make life safer for those around the world," Heidi says.

An estimated 110 million land mines are still lodged in the ground throughout the world. In 2013, Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor recorded 3,308 casualties from mines and explosive remnants of war. More children die from stepping on landmines than adults because they're smaller and their vital organs are closer to the blast. In addition to the risk of death, minefields deprive families and communities of agricultural land and adversely affect their income.

In April 1998, Heidi, a former CNN producer and reporter

learn more

For more information about Roots of Peace, visit rootsofpeace.org.

with extensive contacts, reached out to Kofi Annan, then the secretary general of the United Nations, and with the help of Annan, his wife, Nane, and U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., Heidi launched Roots of Peace from the basement of her family home in San Rafael.

While raising four children, including a newborn, Heidi worked tirelessly to develop the nonprofit. She contacted Napa Valley vintners and garnered their support by appealing to their desire to protect the land that they cultivate and nurture.

Heidi's husband, Gary, was working full-time in Silicon Valley, but he helped out and brought his tech expertise to the organization. When Heidi attended treaty signings or traveled to post-conflict regions, he happily cared for their four young children. As the organization grew, Gary decided to leave his job to work full-time with Heidi at Roots of Peace.

"The most powerful person I could have sitting behind me is my husband," Heidi says.

Roots of Peace participated in a partnership mission with the U.S. State Department in Croatia in January 2000 to learn about the hazards posed by landmines leftover from that country's war. Between 1991 and 1995, 1.5 million landmines were deployed in Croatia. Landmines had been laid in many of the country's vineyards and the wine industry was decimated.

With the help of Napa Valley's Croatian-born Miljenko "Mike" Grgich and the U.S. State Department, Roots of Peace implemented their Mines to Vines project in four regions of

Croatia and converted these minefields into thriving vineyards. Since the project's inception in Croatia, more than 500,000 square meters of land have been cleared.

Things changed for Roots of Peace in 2003. After securing \$6 million from USAID to run their Regional Afghan Municipalities Program, Gary and Heidi were able to hire a full-time receptionist, an accountant and 44 local people for the Afghanistan office. Other organizations soon began approaching Roots of Peace to work on projects. Best of all, they could finally move out of the family's basement and into an office.

Afghanistan was formerly one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. While working there in 2003 and 2004, Gary recalls hearing explosions daily.

"Even the roadsides were mined," Gary says. "You couldn't step off the road, so if you had a car problem you had to fix it on the road."

Roots of Peace hired highly trained local mine clearing organizations. While one landmine costs between \$3 and \$30 to produce, the cost of removing that mine costs between \$300 and \$1,000. For every 5,000 mines successfully removed, one landmine clearance team member is killed and two injured.

Once the land is free of mines, the nonprofit ensures that the fields are returned to farmers immediately. Working with agriculture economists, who analyze the market and determine the best crops for the area, and subcontractors like the University of California at Davis, Roots of Peace entices farmers to move away from cultivating poppies, the raw material for heroin, and advises farmers which crops would be the most profitable and trains them on the best

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GENEROSITY

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method for growing them.

Coming from the private sector, Heidi and Gary tackle the rebuilding process from a business perspective.

"We try to instill in farmers the sense of earning money," Gary says. "Farmers have to pay to participate in the program, so they're invested in the project. We're not a relief organization."

Gary says the most rewarding part of the work is when he sees it click for one of their farmers. One of the first farmers they worked with in Afghanistan had had his legs amputated. After following the Roots of Peace team's instructions for growing grapes using a trellis system, he earned \$16,000 in his third year. Gary remembers how proud the farmer was of his grapes.

In Afghanistan, the nonprofit has impacted over one million families in 34 provinces and helped them double and triple their income from growing crops like almonds, grapes, apricots and pomegranates.

Despite their achievements, working in Afghanistan is dangerous work. On March 28, 2014, the Taliban attacked the Roots of Peace office in Kabul. Heidi and Gary monitored the several-hour siege via Skype from San Rafael. Fortunately, all of their employees survived the attack.

Since 2004, the nonprofit has implemented 35 demining projects in Vietnam, Israel-Palestine, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Afghanistan.

"One of my proudest moments was helping to bring forth the legal framework that resulted in the Minefield Clearance Act in 2011," Heidi says.

The Minefield Clearance Act was Israel's first effort to address landmine contamination at the national level. The bill bans landmines not used for national defense. Although human rights activists had pushed for similar legislation for years, it was campaigning led by 11-year-old Israeli Daniel Yuval, who had lost his leg from a mine blast while playing in the Golan Heights, that got the bill passed.

In the future, Gary says he wants to change the organi-



ROOTS OF PEACE PHOTOS

zation's approach from securing traditional grants to doing more program work. He plans to accomplish this by setting up a venture capital company and using that money to invest in small local businesses.

"By investing in a local apricot processor, that processing company will then buy apricots from lots of local farmers," Gary says.

Additionally, Roots of Peace wants to focus on working with farmers and traders to import spices and sell to wholesalers and distributors in the U.S.

"Last year we were 100 percent funded by donations in Vietnam," Gary says. "This year was a transition year, and by next year we hope to be funded by our own activities in Vietnam. We would like to run all the programs that way."

"It's been a profoundly rewarding journey," says Heidi.

But she says their work is far from finished. The next minefield Heidi wants to demine is Qasr el-Yahud, a baptism site on the Jordan River in Israel.

"It is where three faiths intersect and it is one of the most



At top, Gary Kuhn meets with grape farmers in Afghanistan in 2010. Left, in the Quang Tri Province of Vietnam, Roots of Peace helped more than 2,000 farmers grow and harvest black pepper, a highly profitable crop, in 2014.

holiest places on earth," Heidi says. "And it's mined."

Her goal is to demine the area by the holiday season.

"And then," she says and smiles. "I want to demine the rest of Croatia."

Contributing writer Dominique Farrell has written for various English-language newspapers in Latin America.