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- Maya Kepner

Pictured: Maya Kepner

NCWA
Northern California Water Association



Like Father, Like Daughter

The eyes of the beast hovered slightly over the water. The seemingly unworldly reptile peered across its horizon at the little girl who sat frozen in the canoe. Only a thin sliver of aluminum separated the two. With the hot Texas sun leaving beads of sweat across her brow, Maya believed “this was it.”

Before the stare down could go on much longer, a chuckle came from the other end of the boat. Steve couldn't help but laugh at the girl's imagined doom. The alligator dropped back below the surface and from that day on, it was hard to convince Maya to stay home. She was happily dragged to every survey or surveillance trip Steve would take her on.

At the time Steve worked as the manager of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in South Texas. Opportunities for Maya to join were aplenty but soon enough, she wasn't just tagging along. When family moved to Northern California in the early 2000s, the father and daughter would gear up often for mornings in the wetlands.

“One of the things we loved to do together was duck hunt,” said Maya Kepner. “But it was never just about hunting, it was about spending time in the blinds, seeing the sun come up over the water, hearing the geese flap their wings across the wet fields. We'd become paralyzed watching these beautiful animals take flight overhead.”

Overhead is where Maya would soon find herself as she was routinely flying with CDFW in a helicopter tracking Tule Elk throughout California. But the thrill of the new job was about to take a nose dive. Steep budget cuts meant state agencies would begin furloughing employees every Friday. With a bit less income, she used the off days to team up with dad.

Steve had gone out on his own after retiring from Fish and Wildlife. He found joy working with Northern California landowners to create better habitat for wildlife. “My father was a great listener and he had a real knack for finding partnerships that benefitted both sides.”

Maya felt the pull and decided to team up with her father full time. One of their first major projects is still in operation today. Conaway Ranch, located between Woodland and the Sacramento River, spans 17,000 acres and has become a model for how farm lands can also serve as habitat for hawks, snakes and migrating birds. Maya and her father were able to help ensure 6,000 acres of the ranch became viable habitat for wildlife while still serving as productive farm land.

“When government agencies and private landowners can demonstrate how they can work together to help native species and preserve historic agricultural practices, a beautiful collaboration is born,” said Kepner, Managing Member of American West Conservation.

Maya, the once frightened girl in the canoe, is now the one who feels the joy of her child falling in love with the great outdoors. Just like she did with dad, Maya finds time to drag Dillion out into the fields whenever possible. Something that is never protested by the dusty blonde-haired, 5-year-old who wants nothing more than an afternoon in the mud.

And like grandpa and his mother before him, it seems almost impossible that Dillion won't follow in their footsteps, and that -- will be to the great benefit of wildlife in California.

