

Bellosguardo Boondoggle Continues

This is a modified version of a column that originally ran in The News Letter. To subscribe, visit independent.com/newsletters.

There I was, plopped on East Beach and watching the birds — wondering how pelicans choose who among them leads their “V” formations — when I heard engines rumble behind me.

Looking back and up at Bellosguardo — Santa Barbara’s most nakedly corrupt institution — I saw a line of party rental trucks snake their way from a large white tent on the south lawn to the iron gates below. It was the morning after yet another private event at the property, which is supposed to be operating as a public center for the arts, but instead serves as an \$85 million man-cave for an ex-mayor’s boyfriend, his buddies, and the rich and famous.

I jumped in the sparkling ocean, hoping to cool off, but my blood was already starting to simmer. The umbrage train had already left the station.

I remembered how this spring, the Bellosguardo Foundation had submitted an application to the City of Santa Barbara’s Planning Division to finally start offering guided tours of the 23-acre estate. Seven long years after formation, this was the organization’s first noticeable step toward carrying out the late Huguette Clark’s will.

But the application — which also sought conditional-use to host special events — was

deemed an incomplete mess, and it was sent back to the nonprofit for a rethink. No paperwork has been submitted, yet here it was, throwing another big party, likely in violation of city laws and probably a handful of coastal ordinances. I kept swimming.

I thought back to 2014, the beginnings of this great Bellosguardo Boondoggle, when our then mayor, Helene Schneider, appointed her close companion, Jeremy Lindaman, to lead the organization, despite his shocking lack of qualifications. Lindaman had previously worked as a political consultant and before that for his family’s print shop. He’s since been paid a six-figure salary to run a nonprofit with millions in assets — doing what, exactly, is hard to say, though he’s rumored to live there full-time. Maybe he mows the lawn.

Save for that half-baked application, Lindaman and the Foundation have never publicly stated what their plans are for turning the aged mansion into a modern arts center. They’ve promised press conferences that never happened. They’ve dangled potential partnerships with other arts organizations that never materialized. They’ve auctioned off Clark’s doll collection with no accounting for where the money went.

They’ve blamed fires, the debris flow, and COVID for stalling public access, yet they have managed to host a *Great Gatsby*-themed gala, extravagant weddings, and tours for those willing to cough up thousands of dol-

lars. They’ve fired all the staff, except for a handful of gardeners, and kicked the long-time caretaker to the curb.

Finally, my muscles aching, I turned back toward shore. And I realized, with a sort of sadness, that we can’t be surprised at this slow-moving debacle. That’s because no one is really watching.

Dick Wolf, of *Law & Order* fame, is the Foundation’s chair, but he’s completely absent, which apparently is his MO when serving on Santa Barbara boards. The last time he talked about the Bellosguardo in public was November 2018, when he said, cocktail in hand, that a major announcement was only “six months in the future.”

Remarkably, the Bellosguardo board itself never meets (in violation of its own bylaws). And I can’t see any members of the City Council raising the issue. That leaves the New York Attorney General’s Office (the Foundation is registered back East), and they haven’t shown any interest.

So without any real accountability, it’s no wonder a former political operative — who wound up sinking Schneider’s promising career with bad advice and even worse behavior — has turned Clark’s summer home into his personal party house. So far, no one with the legal, political, or high-society clout is willing to make sure Clark’s will is actually carried out.

A few weeks later, I found out that the Bellosguardo bash I saw had been a wedding party for one of Arianna and Michael Huffington’s daughters. While Michael Huff-

ington sailed off into the silence of his personal sunset a long time ago, Arianna has emerged as a one-name wonder, like Cher and Madonna, a celebrity now famous for having once been famous.

Back in the early 1990s, the Huffingtons were winning the hearts and minds of Santa Barbara’s *hoi polloi* by writing \$10,000 checks to all the nonprofits on whose boards they served. By this nakedly transactional method, Michael — then a restless oil man and real estate developer from Texas — bought himself the congressional seat that included Santa Barbara. Quickly bored, he ran, two years later, against Dianne Feinstein, for her Senate seat.

At that time, hoping to inflate his right-wing street cred, Huffington — a decent guy when he thought no one was looking — endorsed Prop. 187, a statewide initiative that would have prohibited undocumented immigrants from receiving social services. It soon came to light that the Huffingtons had themselves hired an undocumented nanny. This left his campaign in shambles, Feinstein won, and Arianna transformed herself into a high-glam left-wing salonista, prompting Lou Cannon — Summerland resident and a national political commentator of great renown — to mutter, “Once upon a time, the left had some standards.”

Recently, I heard that Jeff Bezos, the Amazon Man, would be renting Bellosguardo soon. Oh well, next time I’m on East Beach, I’ll remember to ask the pelicans how they pick their leader. Maybe they’ll have some advice. But the weather is getting a little chilly for another ocean swim.

—Tyler Hayden