

The Almanac

THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, ATHERTON, PORTOLA VALLEY AND WOODSIDE

JUNE 27, 2018 | VOL. 53 NO. 43

WWW.ALMANACNEWS.COM



CONFESSIONS OF A BONE WOMAN

Portola Valley's Cindie White reveals
the skeletons in her barn

page 16

Menlo couple raises \$20M-plus to reunite
immigrant families | Page 5

Surf Air grounded soon? | Page 5

Koko the signing gorilla dies | Page 10

Confessions of a Bone Woman:
Portola Valley's Cindie White
reveals
the
skeletons
in her barn

Story by Kate Bradshaw | Photos by Natalia Nazarova

Through the blue barn doors at the historic Jelich Ranch lies Portola Valley resident Cindie White's inner sanctum: a cathedral of naturalistic artifacts, every inch of the walls festooned with bones and pelts and taxidermied critters. An elegant oversize table holds stones and crystals arranged in formations that White says carry astrological significance.

The setting evokes the layout of one of those I-Spy kids' books, but one's eye is instantly drawn to the coyote skeleton dangling from the ceiling. White calls it her little wolf.

Cindie White, who was sporting a T-shirt and a friendly smile when *The Almanac* went out for a visit, has lived her life in extremes, intimate with both the opulence of Silicon Valley's elite and the gritty realism of the natural world.

White recently published a memoir called "Confessions of a Bone Woman: Realizing authentic wildness in a civilized world," which details the process she underwent while searching for deeper fulfillment in what, by external appearances, seemed to be a charmed life. It's a journey that took her from having a personal stylist at the Stanford Shopping Center Neiman Marcus to digging for bones in Montana, with a lot of territory in between.

Rise of the bone woman

In her book, White begins her story with her idyllic childhood visits to her grandparents' Garr Ranch. As a teen, her mother remarried, and she moved to Portola Valley. She talks about struggling to adjust to her new life and grappling with body image issues.

She went on to UCLA, pursued an MBA and worked at IBM for a few years before coming home to Portola Valley at age 27 in a deep depression.

"I was living 'the dream' with three girls in a condo near the beach in Santa Monica, and I commuted to IBM in my Porsche. I was suntanned, blonde, and pretty, not to mention social, kind, and smart too. ... [T]he promise was that if I did as (my father and the surrounding culture) said, I'd be happy, loved, and adored. Therefore it made no sense that I was miserable," she writes.

She began to do some soul-searching then, with the help of a psychologist.

She wanted to know how to become "enlivened," she says. Back in Silicon Valley, she found a job in marketing at Orgdata Inc. A couple of years in, the company brought in a new CEO, Rhys (Phillip) White, and they soon became a couple. In January 1992 they became engaged.

White said partygoing in high society became a big part of her life at that point. "Adorning myself with fabulous apparel was a thrilling and creative outlet for me, but it was also an important job, which I regarded as necessary to maintain my identity."

After having two kids within three years of marriage, she became less entranced by the expectations of high society. A reading by an astrologer piqued a budding interest for her in the metaphysical — she claims the astrologer's reading was more resonant with her than her mental health care provider.

For better or worse, White's story was tied to the trajectory of her high-flying CEO husband, and in 1997, the family upgraded to a larger home in Atherton.

Three months later, Orgdata (Informix) announced a \$140 million loss for first quarter. Months later, Phillip White was pressured to resign as CEO. But it didn't faze him, she recalls. "Ironically, he made far more money after being ousted from Orgdata than while he was there," she wrote.



Cindie White, who lives in Portola Valley, keeps a barnful of artifacts from the natural world, artfully displayed.

On the Cover: White, who recently published a memoir, called "Confessions of a Bone Woman: Realizing authentic wildness in a civilized world," surrounded by artifacts she has collected.

During this time, she says, she internalized her husband's ouster and secluded herself socially, diving into books like "Women who Run with the Wolves," by Clarissa Pinkola Estes.

By the following year, she prepared for a comeback in the high-society circuit. As the mom of young kids, though, trying to be beautiful and glamorous came with some internal conflict, she writes.

"One moment I flourished in the gifts of beauty and felt good for supporting my husband in his arena. But in the next moment, I felt shallow for loving the finer things in life and judged myself as a subpar housewife," she writes.

Just before her 40th birthday, on a vacation in Montana, White found herself instinctively compelled to dig for bones, she writes. She describes coaxing a bone out of the dirt near a cliff at a site known to have buffalo bones, and the strong reaction she had: "It fell into my palm, flailing like a live wire. Skin to bone, I curled my fingers around it and felt my blood go hot as an electrical surge fired up the DNA in every cell of my body. The flash ignited something primal in me, some kind of a memory."

In 2000, she and Phillip bought Jelich Ranch, which she threw herself into restoring. She observed the life cycles of animals, insects and birds. "The bones were symbolic of my discovering and reclaiming the parts of my soul that had been tamed or rejected by social conditioning."

After that, she launched Camp Finbarr at the ranch, running outdoor activities for kids. Around the same time, she dove into learning about wilderness and gardening.

Initially, she pursued her interest in bones and dead animals in secret.

"I thought people would think I was weird," she says.

She's had a lot of guides along her journey — soul coaches, Native American shamans, acupuncturists and astrologists — who have helped shape her beliefs in the metaphysical. "I kind of maxed out what they could teach me," she says.

East West Bookshop in Mountain View also gave her tools for exploring the mystical and spiritual she felt in the natural world. "The best part was at each visit, I was serendipitously drawn to certain books, trinkets, and tools that altered my perspective on life," she writes.

In 2002, things took a turn for the worse when White's husband, Phillip, whom she refers to as Rhys throughout her book, was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of carrying out a financial accounting fraud. Eventually, he pleaded guilty to one count of criminal securities fraud and was sentenced to two months in a minimum-security federal penitentiary, White writes. She says she encouraged him to take the plea deal.

During that challenging time, she writes in her book, she tried to learn from the animals she studied, especially the owl. "As devastating as it was, my predicament was an opportunity for growth, and I knew it. Studying and observing Owl's behavior, I was inspired to sit patiently in my darkness

to hunt for the pestilent thoughts that plagued me. Owl wisdom guided me to grasp those pests, discern my inner truth, digest the sustenance, and spit out what no longer served me."

Around that time, she also came across a dead coyote that she put a fence around and watched decompose over the course of a year. The now clean bones dangle from the ceiling of her barn, laid out in an elegant framework of a once-living animal.

Less noticeable in White's barn, but no less significant, is an understated drawing of a woman and a coyote, inscribed "La Huesera."

The term, which means "bone woman" in Spanish, is a central figure in White's narrative. The drawing, she says, pulls from a Native American tale of a mythical old woman who collected a full skeleton of wolf bones and breathed life back into them. The wolf then transformed into a laughing woman. Like "La Huesera," White says, she uses animal bones to honor the natural world and pursue a process of self-discovery.

More recently, White writes, she sent her kids off to college and grew more independent in pursuing her less mainstream interests. She attended a weeklong seminar at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, befriended

an outdoorsy neighbor in Atherton who invited her on a wolf-tracking excursion in Michigan, and traveled to Maun, Botswana, in Africa on a wildlife immersion program. She felt personal connections to the wolf and the elephant on those respective trips.

In subsequent years, her dog died and her cat had kittens, and those experiences gave her more appreciation for the cycle of life, she says. And in writing the book, she got better at setting boundaries with her family so she could work without interruption, she says.

Now, after completing her memoir, she feels that she's ready to take on the role of an "elder," like the mythical bone woman, and impart her wisdom to young people, she says. That wisdom, she adds, comes from "inside, from a life well-lived."

Today, she runs a business as an "inner wellness guide," organizes consultations, custom ceremonies and mother-daughter bonding experiences, writes a blog, and does public speaking.

Lessons learned

Her belief now, she says, is that everything is about balance, and cycles. Sometimes, she notes, people do need to work hard and "manifest" toward their goals.

Without balance, she says, people become exhausted, anxious and depressed. "We need to go inward to receive energy and insights. That's how we heal. That's what I help people do."

"It's really just about showing people it's OK to get to know yourself," she explains. "[It's] rewarding to be bold, to be brave, to go against the grain."

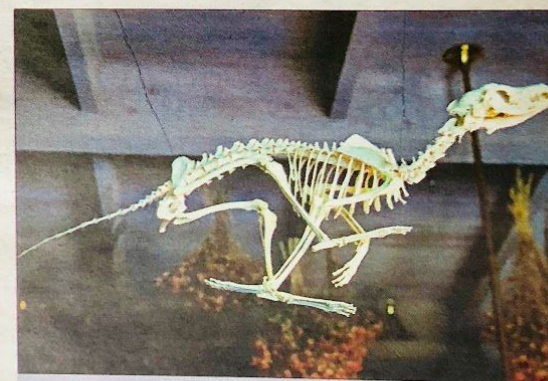
"The soul speaks in symbols," she says. Animals, particularly the wolf and the owl, carry particular personal significance for her. "Everything decomposes except bones," she says. "They endure." ▣



Bones, furs, crystals and skulls adorn White's barn.



La Huesera, depicted above, is a mythical "bone woman" who collected bones and brought a wolf back to life.



Since wolves are extremely rare in California, White had to settle for reconstructing the skeleton of a coyote, which she calls her "little wolf."