



## Environmentalist Dotson Earns Bay Hero Award

by [Bonnie Stewart](#) - October 1, 2019

### He will be honored in October with a Bay Hero Award



Whitney Dotson stood in the middle of his family's dream and watched it come alive a few years ago. At his side was Robert Doyle, the general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District.

Before them stretched 200 acres of wetlands in the eastern part of the San Francisco Bay, property the Dotson family had spent four decades fighting to preserve as open space for the public to enjoy.

On that day, Dotson and Doyle saw fresh rainwater filling the newly created wetlands for the first time. And the tide was flowing into the saltwater marshes. Birds were landing on the water.

For a minute, they saw a duck that wasn't acting like a duck. As they drew closer, they realized it was a hunter's decoy that had floated in from way out in the bay to the marshland. They laughed about being fooled by a decoy. But its journey proved the water system they had rebuilt was functioning. It was a victory in wetland restoration.

“We had a great day out there,” Doyle said. “He was just so pleased, so, so pleased.”

In 2017, the park district renamed the property the Dotson Family Marsh.

The Dotsons’ connection to the area began when Whitney’s father, the Reverend Richard Daniel Dotson, brought his family to Richmond, California, from Louisiana. He battled attempts to develop the acreage in the 1970s. Whitney and his environmentalist sister, Ethel, continued the fight.

Over the years, under Whitney’s leadership, the people in his Parchester Village community and the Richmond area staved off numerous proposals by developers who wanted to build everything from housing to an airport on the then-neglected land. Known then as the Breuner Marsh, it had become a dumping ground for tons trash and debris, Doyle said.

Still, Whitney had a vision for what the marsh could become. He saw wetlands and trails and wildlife and people enjoying a place that would protect the shoreline from a rising tide and act like a giant sponge, filtering polluted runoff. He believed the property could be saved and restored.

“He was the champion of preserving this property,” Doyle said.

In 2008, Whitney, by then a retired public health program director, was elected to the park district board and gained an even more powerful voice for the environment and the people he loved.

“He encouraged the park district to go to court,” Doyle said. The court allowed the park district to use eminent domain to buy the 200-acre property for about \$8 million. The restoration bill was another \$14 million.

“So, this was the dream that Whitney always had,” Doyle said. It gave the people of Richmond more public access to the San Francisco Bay – a lot more, taking it from just 100 feet of shoreline to about one mile of shoreline, Doyle said.

The renovation also has given a self-sustaining home to numerous types of wildlife, including endangered species such as the Ridgway’s rail and the salt marsh harvest mouse.

“Thousands of seasonal waterfowl migrate through the area and use the shoreline to rest and feed,” Doyle said.

The Dotson Family Marsh project includes not only restored wetlands, it has a mile of causeway along the shoreline with pedestrian and bicycle trails.

The marsh is an incredible success, and Whitney is credited for pushing it forward. He also has worked on many other environmental and social justice issues and is the president of the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, which works to save access to Richmond’s northern shoreline.

To bring the community to the bay, he has organized the North Richmond Shoreline Festival, which attracts diverse organizations and groups of people who come together to celebrate their open spaces.

Inclusion and equity are huge issues for the park district, Doyle said. Inclusion, equity and civil rights have always been important to Dotson, too. As African Americans, he and his family faced racism and segregation in the South and in California, too.

Whitney persevered, earning a master’s degree from UC Berkeley and carrying out the family’s environment agenda.

“If he had a choice between a small, medium or large goal, he’d go for the large — every time,” Doyle said.

Whitney deserves the Bay Hero award from Save The Bay for all the heavy lifting he has done in the bay, Doyle said. “He is always the voice for the voiceless,” Doyle said. “I just want to thank him and give him a big hug.”



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Two of our three amazing [#BayHeroes](#) joined [@SueHallTraffic](#) last week. Proud to name [@openroadtv](#) host Doug McConnell, VADM Jody Breckenridge and Whitney Dotson as our 2019 [#sfbayday](#) heroes. [#savesfbay](#) [@965KOIT](#) [@EBRPD](#) [@FleetWeekSF](#)

