



BIONEERS

25 YEARS
OF
VISIONARY
LEADERSHIP

YEARBOOK
CREATION STORY

SEEING AROUND

CORNERS



Bioneers Creation Story: He Said/She Said

Kenny Ausubel founded Bioneers with Nina Simons, his business partner and wife. From its origins, the Bioneers creation story has been a co-creation story.

He Said

By Kenny Ausubel

Bioneers was born in the water. Specifically in a hot tub at 10,000 Waves in the mountains above my home of Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was visiting with Josh Mailman, a friend and visionary leader in social finance. Of course, stories don't always begin at the beginning. Creation has ancestors.

Josh had been an investor in two of my projects that partly led to the genesis of Bioneers. One was Hoxsey: How Healing Becomes a Crime, a feature documentary I made in the '80s about the medical politics surrounding the obstruction and suppression of promising unconventional cancer therapies. After my father died of cancer at age 56, I fell across the saga of Harry Hoxsey, "the wildest story in medical history." It revealed the centuries-old philosophical civil war between conventional allopathic and natural medicine over a fundamental principle that would ignite the vision behind Bioneers.

Allopathic medicine's central belief was that the body had no ability to heal itself. The doctor had to intervene "heroically" to kill disease. To the contrary, natural medicine's Empiric tradition saw the role of the doctor or practitioner as supporting the body's inherent ability to heal itself.

The underlying principle was working with nature to heal nature. Nature has a profound ability for self-repair and healing. How does nature heal? How can we tap that healing force of nature to restore nature and ecosystems?

The other principle arose in 1985 when I made a film about an unusual garden on an Indian Pueblo near Santa Fe, where I encountered Gabriel Howearth, a master organic farmer and seed collector. He had gathered an astonishing collection of open-pollinated native seeds from all over the Americas, mostly from indigenous farmers. I had never imagined anything like this marvel of agricultural diversity.



“THE MOST PROFOUND INSIGHT OF modern science is that every one of us is the universe becoming aware of itself after billions of years of cosmic evolution. You’re all something the entire cosmos is doing right now. The universe matters because we are the universe mattering, here on this planet. Give yourselves a hand. We don’t know how often this happens. Although it’s tempting to suggest that the return of this Earth-centered cosmic model implies that the Copernican revolution has come full circle, it actually signifies the emergence of a higher level of complexity in which science has confirmed that we are not separate from this planet, that we are all indigenous earthlings. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern science, we can truly reach for the stars, but ultimately it’s up to every single one of us to decide if we’re gonna take on the responsibility, particularly the multi-generational responsibility, that this realization implies, because there is one thing absolutely certain: The universe we design for is the universe we’re gonna get.”

– DAVID MCCONVILLE, CHAIR,
BUCKMINSTER FULLER INSTITUTE



▲ Photos from top left: Kenny Ausubel & Nina Simons; Josh Mailman, c. 1991 Bioneers conference; Environmental News Service Names Bioneers "Top Stories" 1990

They say variety is the spice of life, but, ecologically speaking, diversity is the very fabric of life: a core principle of nature's operating instructions. It's nature's fail-safe mechanism against extinction, the source of resilience in the face of change, which is the only constant in nature. It's also the sacred tree of life with intrinsic value. By 1985 scientists were warning about the emerging 6th Age of Extinctions, the first caused by the human hand. The loss of agricultural seed diversity was especially perilous to humanity. In 1989 Gabriel and I co-founded Seeds of Change as an organic biodiversity seed company to reintroduce diversity into the food web through backyard gardeners.



“THE CULTURE I COME FROM SAW the universe as the fountain of everything including consciousness. In our culture we're scolded for being so arrogant to think that we're smart. An individual is not smart, according to our culture. An individual is merely lucky to be a part of a system that has intelligence that happens to reside in them. In other words, be humble about this always. The real intelligence isn't the property of an individual corporation – the real intelligence is the property of the universe itself.”

– JOHN MOHAWK

Seeds of Change. I invited her to help me put together the conference. From the outset, her vision and unique contributions have shaped Bioneers in countless ways.

The third spoke was J.P. Harpignies, a close friend since the '60s. Inspired by the first Bioneers, he volunteered his exceptional scope of topics, contacts and producing skills gained as a program director for the N.Y. Open Center. The three of us have continued to work closely together as the core conference programming team, and over time we've included other key Bioneers staff and outside partners in their areas of expertise.

The Bioneers conference was an experiment and we frankly didn't know what we were doing. Call it “beginner's mind,” to be polite. Initially called the Seeds of Change conference, the word bioneers first appeared in print in 1991 in the Seeds of Change catalog, and soon became the name. Within three years, we outgrew the Santa Fe facilities,

During the '70s and '80s, I'd sought to learn about people who had discovered fundamental solutions to our most pressing environmental and social crises. A pattern emerged. They peered deep into the heart of nature and living systems in search of cues and clues. After all, nature has 3.8 billion years of R&D under her belt. What's here is what works.

The most basic question they asked: How would nature do it? I came to call them “bioneers”—biological pioneers who looked to nature not as resource but as teacher, mentor and metric. (Eight years later Janine Benyus would give this field a name with her landmark book, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*.) These bioneers used systems thinking, a “solve-the-whole-problem” approach embracing the rich arc of human endeavor, guided by the North Star of intelligence saturating the natural world.

As Josh Mailman and I sweated in the cold mountain air, I was raving about these amazing innovators and systemic solutions, and how the world didn't know about them. He asked: “Why don't you have a conference?” I'd never even been to a conference and it sounded boring. I shrugged him off. Then he said, “I'm giving you \$10,000. Have a conference.”

In tandem with Seeds of Change, Gabriel and I had already started a sister nonprofit to work with indigenous farmers to preserve the equally endangered, priceless traditional knowledge and farming practices. Bioneers became the second nonprofit project.

Until then, I'd been a freelance journalist and filmmaker. I grew up in an academic home which was a floating salon crackling with the spirited exchange of ideas. Nina and I had met in 1987, fallen in love, and started working together instantly. She'd signed on as marketing director for



- ▲ Suzanne Harjo, Tom Hayden, others, Bioneers 1992
- ◀ Paul Hawken c. 1994
- ▼ Federation of Southern Cooperatives' Ralph Paige, J.L. Chestnut, Lukata Mjumbe, with Danny Glover, 2001 Bioneers



and in 1993 we moved the conference to the Bay Area, a progressive hotbed of cultural ferment where we had a strong base for Seeds of Change.

In 1994, Nina and I unexpectedly departed the company, shortly before M&M Mars acquired it. We retained custody of the nonprofit activities. Bioneers had always operated as a volunteer passion project. For three years, we managed to keep it afloat under considerable duress, on top of day jobs.

The conference kept growing. In 1997, we had the biggest turnout yet – 800+ people. But we learned on the final morning we were \$10,000 in the hole because of a competing event. When you don't have it, that's a fortune. My blood ran cold. Extinction loomed, up close and personal.

Exhausted and dispirited, that December I had dinner in L.A. with Susanna Dakin, an investor in Seeds of Change, modest Bioneers donor and friend. It was just not in my heart to ask her for money. She started peppering me with eager questions and ideas for Bioneers. I forgot my troubles and plunged into the vision with her.

Long story short, Sue stopped me in mid-sentence. Unsolicited, she offered a large gift that became \$1 million over a five-year period. That mind-bending turn of events dodged our near-death experience.

In 1998, the Bioneers creation story got a second life. At the time, all we did were a far smaller conference and a tiny food and farming program. We set about creating all that has happened since, though seeds were present for much of it.

Bioneers arose from a quest for healing. Now we know more profoundly than ever that restoration is an enterprise of healing – of both Earth and ourselves. Nature has a profound capacity for healing and we can act as healers. And people are amazing when we're tuned in to the "higher angels of our nature," and the higher angels of nature.

The creation story of Bioneers is a co-creation story, even more so today - a community of leadership that has come together during these 25 years. As it was in the beginning, Bioneers is a celebration of the genius of nature and people. Give thanks.

The Bioneers Creation Story

She Said

By Nina Simons

When Kenny and I fell in love in the spring of 1987, we began working together immediately on the Hoxsey film. I was deeply inspired by the imperative of getting cancer patients access to an array of treatment options, and helped distribute the movie widely. A few months later, I could hardly have been more shocked and frankly disinterested as my new filmmaker love sat at my kitchen table writing a business plan for a seed company. My background and passions were in theater and film production and the arts. A seed company?

The world changed for me when we visited the Seeds of Change farm and master gardener and seedsman Gabriel Howarth. The garden was a celebration of color, texture and taste, with heirloom varieties like elephant head amaranth languorously stretching a scarlet trunk into the turquoise sky. As we walked – tasting herbs like chocolate basil and lemon licorice mint - I became enchanted with the abundant beauty, scent and deliciousness. My senses were dancing.



“FOR 10 YEARS, I CONSIDERED BIONEERS TO BE the people on stage. All that changed for me when the renowned Alabama attorney and civil rights activist J.L. Chestnut spoke in 2001. He began to use the word bioneer to address everyone. He said: ‘I raise these concerns to you because fighting on behalf of women, on behalf of minority people of color, fighting on behalf of the environment and the planet are all one big battle. We bioneers know that violence, greed, racism, unchecked materialism and abuse of this planet and nature are their own form of terrorism, and will eventually destroy us if we don’t first put an end to it.’ We were all bioneers, if we chose to be. All our contributions, collective creativity and imagination were needed to remake this world. Won’t you join us?”

– NINA SIMONS



▲ From top left clockwise: Nina Simons, Mayumi Oda, Rachel Bagby, Claire Cummings, Tara Sterling, Belvie Rooks, Susan Griffin, Diane Haug

That garden was the most glorious co-creation I'd ever seen: a garden of relationships. Gabriel knew each plant better than many people know their own families. He introduced us to them, explaining how they were all related to each other. There was a quality of nature-human partnership I'd never experienced before – cooperation that vibrated with vitality, fertility and beauty.

Gabriel grimly described the cascading loss of biodiversity in the food system. Industrial agriculture and agribusiness corporations were speeding the loss of varieties, a treacherous threat to our collective future.

As I left the garden, I felt the spirit of the natural world tap me on the shoulder and say, “You’re working for me now.” I returned home, quit my job and went to work for the startup seed company, embarking on the steepest learning curve of my life.

In spite of my growing passion for nature’s diversity and resilience, when Kenny first approached me to help him produce what became the Bioneers conference, I wasn’t sure if it was the right work for me. But I could feel that it was important, so I agreed to collaborate as co-producer.

I listened to impassioned, brilliant speakers tell how they’d created out-of-the-box solutions that really worked, often modeled on nature’s wisdom. I found myself listening like a five-year-old, my mouth ajar in wonder, attention riveted. Kenny and I looked at each other and agreed: “The world has got to know about these people!” I had found a community of leaders whose voices and visions I wanted to serve with all my heart.

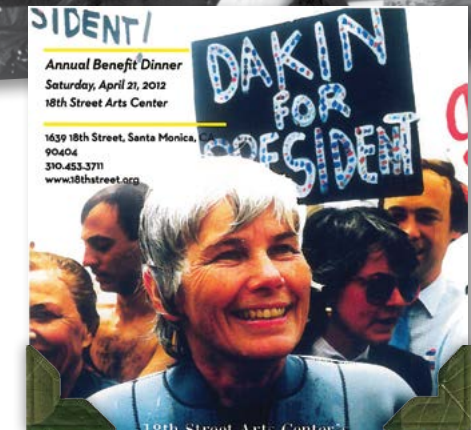
My past experience in theater and film, and even in managing restaurants, all proved useful in coalescing diverse people toward a common goal. Since we knew little about conventional conferences, I felt free to bring my theater experience, creative vision and relational sensibilities to shaping Bioneers to create conditions for transformational experience. I knew that integrating the arts, embodiment and a sense of the sacred were vitally important. I also understood the key contributions of walking our talk, setting and food. We wove those sensibilities into our work early on.

In 1992, I was deeply moved by a panel of Native American leaders reflecting on the 500-year anniversary of Columbus “discovering” America. I was profoundly affected when Petuuche Gilbert of Acoma Pueblo said, “Five hundred years ago you came, and we welcomed you with open arms. If you came again today, we would do the same.” He spoke of his people’s philosophy of peaceful co-existence. His forgiveness, clarity and open heart stunned me. Knowing how gravely indigenous peoples of this continent have suffered, I felt humbled by how much there was to learn from these old-growth cultures.

The first lens I learned from Bioneers was that we had made a systems error to imagine that we as human beings were apart from nature, rather than a part of it. Truly it’s all connected, and we’re all connected. The second lens, which I learned from indigenous peoples, was to honor the sacred aliveness in every part of the visible and invisible world, to remember, seek guidance from and honor “all our relations.”

A third lens informed my vision in 1995 when I was beginning to reflect on my own identity as a woman. After viewing a movie called “The Burning Times” about the European witch hunts, I saw that underpinning our social and ecological challenges was a deep legacy of imbalance between the masculine and the feminine, biases that are embedded in our thinking, institutions and societies. I realized that just as I had, many women have internalized self-limiting stories that make it harder to express and achieve parity in leadership in every sector.

In 1996, I began programming diverse women leaders around “Women and the Environment” to explore this arena from differing paradigms, perspectives and disciplines. The following year, we featured an entire morning called



▲ Photos from top: Indigenous Panel: Francisco X. Alarcon, Marcellus Bear Heart Williams, Petuuche Gilbert, Emigdio Ballon, Suzanne Harjo; Florencio De Carvalho, Marcellus Bear Heart Williams, Dr. Andrew Weil, 1992 Bioneers; Susannah Dakin

Restoring the Feminine, featuring an array of multicultural perspectives and disciplines. As eco-feminist pathfinder Starhawk later wrote: “Relational thinking (which ran through the morning session) dissolves the gaps between science and spirit, between spirit and activism, and between action and healing. In many ways, our panel embodied the essence of the creative synthesis that characterizes the Bioneers.”

Around 2003, I was counseled by an indigenous teacher to learn more about the nexus of women and money, because she said “in most indigenous cultures, women sit at the center of the circle, and they are responsible for managing resources for the community. The men are stationed around the perimeter, in a guardianship or protective stance. In your culture, however, those roles are largely reversed.”

Some of the most innovative donor-activists I knew were women, and we began to programmatically explore Femonomics and how women are transforming our relationship to money, business and economics. In truth, the lion’s share of destruction of both people and nature is driven by economic factors. Shifting to a life-affirming, long-view economy that values nature and caring changes the terms of engagement, and women appear well equipped to do a better job at financial and resource management.

“RESTORE: RENEW, REPAIR, BRING BACK TO health, strengthen. Sustainability is the dynamic mid-point in the perpetual natural cycles of destruction and restoration. Sustainability means satisfying human needs without diminishing the chances of future generations. It means upholding the web of life. In a world so radically damaged, to achieve sustainability, we need to tip the scales heavily toward restoration.”



Paul Stamets, Director of Research, Fungi Perfecti

2014 Invention Ambassador, American Academy for the Advancement of Science

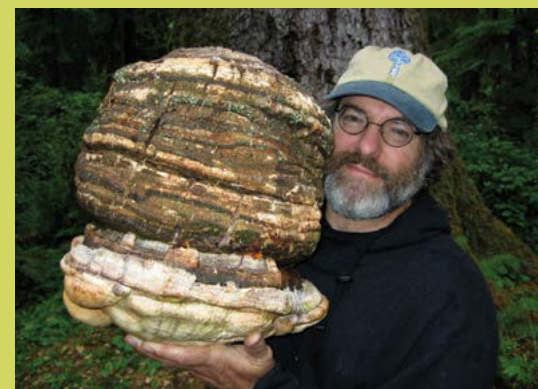
“The Bioneers community represents voices from nature. The rush of technology leaves toxic debris fields whose costs have been pushed upon unborn generations. Who is representing the interests of our descendants? Where is their collective voice in this debate? Bioneers has become that voice.

“When I first came to Bioneers in 1996, I felt like a shipwrecked spirit who had finally arrived on an island of highly ascended souls. My concern about our responsibility for healing the ecosystem was one voice in an emergent collective consciousness. Bioneers became a magnet, a gravitational force, converging to form a colony with spirited individuals: First Peoples, scientists, environmentalists, social justice advocates, religious leaders, artists, musicians, and concerned citizens unified to come together to form a new ecology of consciousness. Bioneers became a new ecosystem. The flow of knowledge, shared problems, and surprising solutions produced rays of hope that radiated out from the Bioneers conference far an

wide through space and time. The intercultural influence may be a difficult metric to measure but not a difficult one to appreciate.

“From my first walking up on the Bioneer’s stage, my life was forever changed. The response I received was a new form of nutrients for my starving soul. I was re-inspired to use my knowledge to help others, many of whom had parts of the solution to a global puzzle. As the world stage for these ideas grew, I realize that the roots – or in my case, the mycelium – first found the fertility of the Bioneer’s ecosystem as a place to grow, develop, share, and be humbled by the historical opportunity we all have been given by being part of a movement greater than any one person. The adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts rings so true with Bioneers. Bioneers is not just about one conference but about a re-awakening of a family of souls, like healthy soils composed of vastly different organisms, who collectively nurture generations into the future.

“Bioneers awakened me, from this first experience and the many that have ensued, and became the mother of many connections, ideas, inventions and most of all deep friendships that span the generations. The Earth embraces the Bioneers, and smiles with us, approvingly, in response.



▲ Paul Stamets and friend

A growing awareness of how my life as a woman has been punctuated by experiences of bias and injustice increased my passion to program sessions about understanding racism, oppression, white privilege and gender roles and fluidity, and the necessity of learning and practicing “beloved community,” and also to launch Cultivating Women’s Leadership intensives. It’s all connected.

Though Bioneers has been in a nonstop spiral of evolution and learning, we’ve remained true to our initial intent. We offer healing, inspiration, strategies, models and connections to strengthen the emergent movement of movements that Paul Hawken calls “Blessed Unrest” to help heal nature and people, and transform culture. I am so grateful for this opportunity to encourage and ignite greater leadership among so gifted and passionate a community of colleagues. With our hearts and nature to guide us, we can hardly go wrong.

“HERE’S LESSON ONE. THINGS ARE CONNECTED. Environment isn’t just another item on the list. It is, in fact, the lynchpin that connects everything else on the list.”

– DAVID W. ORR, PAUL SEARS DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT OF OBERLIN COLLEGE, BIONEERS BOARD

Sacred Whale and Sea Dragon: A Gift to Bioneers – A Gift to the World

At the 2009 conference, two indigenous guests from New Zealand, master carver Wikuki Kingi, QSM, and cultural psychologist Tania Wolfgramm, presented Bioneers with a sea dragon carved from a whalebone.

“The magnificent whale for us in the Pacific is known as the great living library of knowledge. Whale swims the oceans of the world remembering and feeling the memories of all living things, waiting for the time when we can remember to talk to them and learn the wisdom we need to know to survive and live in harmony with Mother Earth.

“The carving is a manifestation of the sea dragon – the guardian of the oceans. The sea dragon carries with it the ancient prayers that hold the ‘mana’ to help to save the world. But this will not happen until humankind is ready to receive it – only then can the healing begin.

“The sea dragon of sacred whale is gifted to Bioneers as you are an inspirational group who have demonstrated a commitment to saving this Earth. Bioneers honor the whale as part of the web of life, understand its timelessness, its strengths and vulnerabilities. Bioneers continues to act as a conduit for many who seek to honor that code, not only through words but through action.”



▲ Sea dragon carved from whale bone honoring Bioneers as a great living library of knowledge.

BIONEERS YEARBOOK CREDITS

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“NINA AND KENNY HAVE GROWN A SIMULTANEOUSLY meticulous and wild garden from the seeds of diversity, struggle, and compassion. They have tended it with the water of listening, including, expanding and intermingling with the sunlight of community, of questioning and discovery. They are now beginning to see the bloom of a whole new way of being on this Earth. An invitation to Bioneers is an invitation to join your story, your struggle with the many struggles. It is an invitation to open your heart and mind, to go further, to be braver. From mushrooms to meditation, from the rising wisdom and vision of the Indigenous to the shared concrete steps of movement building, Bioneers is a Garden of Re-imagination, the green weaving of the story of our survival.”

– EVE ENSLER, author, artist, founder One Billion Rising and V-Day

DOUBLE DOWN ON BIONEERS

Make a Difference that Really Makes a Difference

AS WE CELEBRATE BIONEERS’ 25TH ANNIVERSARY IN 2014, it’s a golden moment to double down on your support to ensure and optimize Bioneers’ ongoing contributions to help turn the tide at this once-in-a-civilization moment.

We invite you to deepen your investment or start now to generate a Return on Engagement that harvests 25 years’ of visionary leadership, practical experience and actionable knowledge.

When you support Bioneers, you’re leveraging our entire community of leadership—a movement of movements.

We thank each and every one of you who has helped us reach this remarkable milestone. Every single gift—large and small—has helped bring us to where we are today.

Play big. Make a difference that really makes a difference by generously supporting Bioneers.

You can make a secure online donation at www.bioneers.org or contact give@bioneers.org or 415-660-9305.

To learn about our Kinship Circle of engaged higher donors, and about our Legacy Giving program, please contact Executive Director Joshua Sheridan Fouts at josh@bioneers.org or 415-660-9302.

With your generous support, our greatest legacy is yet to come.

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▲ Photos from left: Afia Walking Tree, Deb Lane, Eve Enslar at Bioneers conference 2014; attendees at Bioneers conference 2007

