

## **I See Myself**

Graciella Rossi - October 20, 2013 – FOR River Awards Address

Good Evening River Friends. I need you to know that even though it is hard for me to stand up here, I am doing it because I wanted you, in recognizing my work as a founder, to honor all the women who have contributed in so many ways to the Stanislaus and saving rivers. You will all do introductions later but I would like the women of the river movement to be recognized. I am Graciella Rossi. Known to many of you as Gracielle. When I helped to form Friends of the River. I was 19 years old so I consider myself more of a founding daughter who was awestruck by the skills of my fellow founders. I learned early though that I was a good organizer. I ran the petition drive for San Francisco and then became the Northern California Coordinator for Prop 17 and then continued to organize for many years while building the organization ETC with my now husband Rick Spittler. ETC provides trips for people with special needs. Decades later I am a teacher in the public schools feeling most at home in the school garden. I only have a few minutes so I can't tell you the many stories that I would like tell about you. So instead I wrote you a piece of prose which is about me and the river and hopefully about you:

I see myself

I am 19 years old

Strong and Steadfast

walking barefoot on thorny oak leaves,

the same swimming suit and shorts,

boaters butt,

surviving on leftover trip food,

the easiness of my smile

feeling the exhilaration

of being half an inch each from the

wall at Bailey Falls

I remember the river

dipping in my sierra cup for a drink

the smell of the fig tree,

the damp limestone in the cave,  
the dripping maiden hair ferns  
the starry nights,

I am setting up the boat through the rapid,  
pushing limits,  
Being scared of death rock,  
Wrapping a boat there  
losing the overnight gear for a group of politicians,  
thanking the heavens for the extra stash at Marty's Camp,  
coming back a year later in the drought and collecting the whole  
commissary on the bottom of the river.

I remember the children of all ages and abilities  
who found magic in the canyon  
5 day trips on a 9 mile stretch  
The watery womb of love that enveloped us,  
slipping and sliding in Rose Creek with blind children  
running a paddle boat from the front with deaf kids  
strapping on a wheelchair to my boat.

Opening our hearts  
The beauty of the river reflecting within us

Mark and I  
talking late into the night  
warming by the campfire  
Brave, Innocent and able to leap tall buildings  
Who is exactly is the Army Corps of Engineers?

I see the river guides  
becoming leaders, decision makers  
The gathering of River warriors  
Each with contributions  
Our weapons -  
Organizing, writing, strategizing, speaking, working, guiding, filming,  
drawing, teaching,

Working together  
Working out our differences  
Making a plan  
making another plan  
becoming more effective  
facing our obstacles  
making another plan

I see myself dripping with sweat  
in nice clothes in DC  
Wanting to convince, influence, educate  
Pass the bill

What we have become  
Better  
So many tears for the river  
but we have each other  
The river flows in us  
And has given us gifts  
The “silenced” river speaks through us  
Flowing from our hearts, our hands, our eyes,  
With age we have more skills and power and grace  
I am so thankful

And we are called to service  
We remain warriors for the rivers and wild places  
Dispelling “mummified” ideas

Knowing the value of natural places  
Nature is the source of our health  
Let us always move forward bravely

*Delivered at 2013 FOR River Awards Gala, when Mark Dubois Awarded  
went to Stanislaus River activists*