NOVEMBER 2024

KENTFIELD & ROSS LIVING

JAKE WALKER
SEACOLOGY

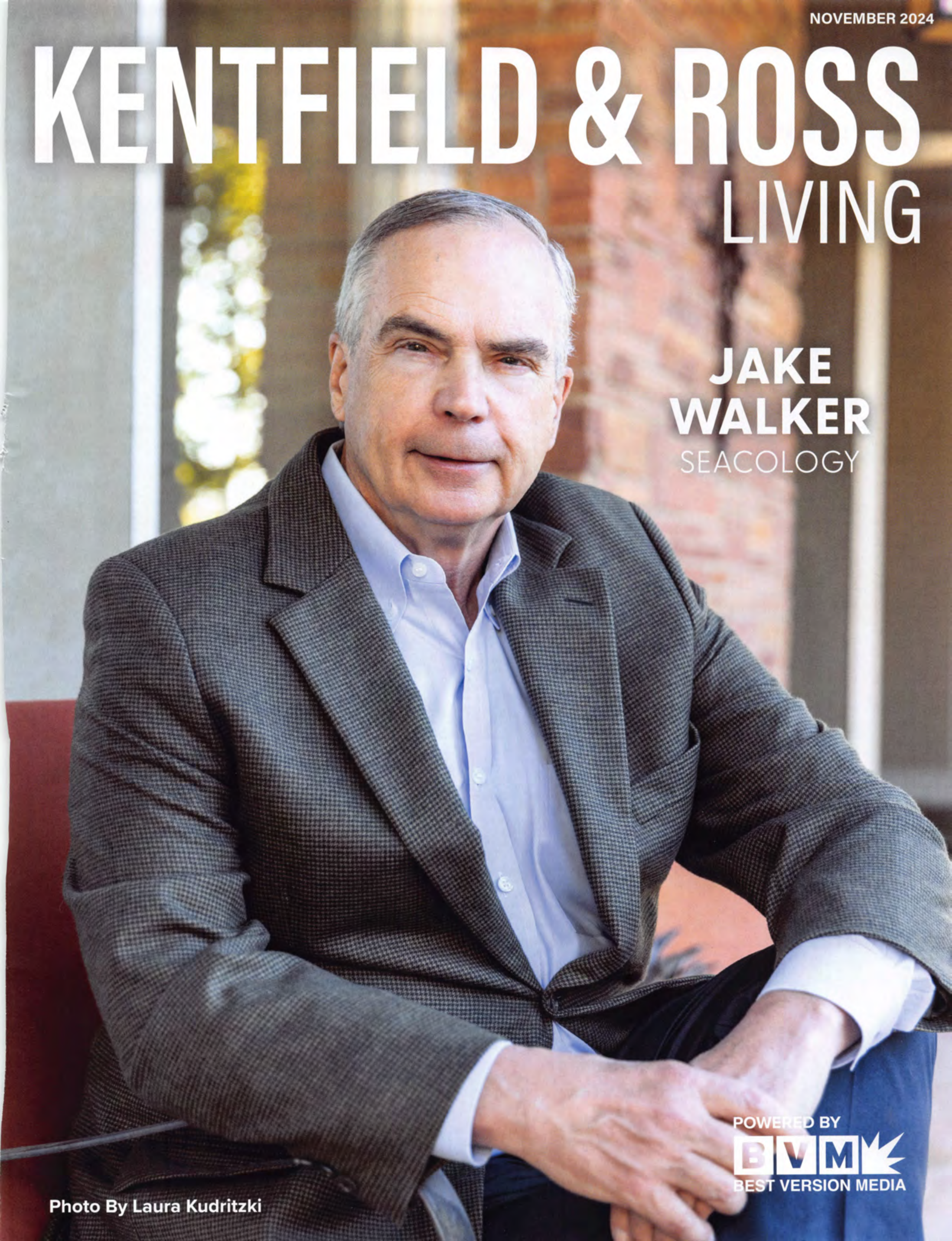

Photo By Laura Kudritzki

Jake Walker: Seacology

By Ann Peckenpaugh Becker | Photos by Laura Kudritzki Photography

Jake Walker is as passionate about advising his clients about wills and trusts as he is about Seacology Foundation, a nonprofit on whose board he's served for over twenty years. Jake introduced us to this remarkable nonprofit—and also impressed us with the multidisciplinary knowledge needed to be an effective Estate Planning Attorney. He and his wife, Cindy, live in Kent Woodlands.

Tell us about Seacology.

Seacology Foundation's mission is to protect the unique habitats and cultures of islands worldwide. Over the years, we've done 432 projects in 70 countries, protecting 1.5 million acres. All of our work is focused on island ecosystems—coral reefs, coastal wetlands, mountain forests and the local indigenous people who have been preserving them for generations. We work directly with island communities, helping them to preserve their unique cultures for their children while saving precious island habitats.

Why does Seacology focus on islands?

Our planet's extinction threats are most acute on islands, where most animal extinctions in the past 500 years have occurred. Islands are only five percent of Earth's land, but almost 40 percent of critically endangered animals live on islands. Island communities are under constant pressure to boost economic development, even at the cost of environmental damage.

Because islanders control their own land and sea, we can help them directly in an efficient and effective way. We help the locals support actual preservation. They just need some help to help themselves.

How did Seacology get started?

Dr. Paul Cox, an American ethnobotanist, was doing field research in the forests of Samoa in 1990 when villagers told him they were going to lose their government-funded teachers unless they constructed a better school. They had no money for a school so they planned to sell the logging rights to 20,000 acres of rainforest surrounding their village to a Japanese lumber company.

Dr. Cox offered a solution: If he could raise the money to build a new school, would the villagers agree to conserve the forest? Dr. Cox returned to the US, raised the funds needed by reaching out to friends and colleagues, and started Seacology Foundation.

And did that village get their school and preserve the rainforest?

Yes, the Samoan village of Faealupo got a new schoolhouse, kept its teachers and has preserved its rainforest. Dr. Cox was named an honorary Chief and wrote a fascinating book, Nafanua: Saving the Samoan Rain Forest.

Is that the model Seacology uses everywhere?

Yes, the Seacology "win-win" model is to provide an islander requested material benefit in exchange for a pledge to protect natural resources. To the recipients it may seem like a business deal, but to us it's charitable conservation. We don't acquire any rights in their land or what we build for them.

Let's switch gears and talk about your earlier years. Where were you born and raised?

I was born on the peninsula, and moved to San Francisco when I was four. I went to Grant School, Stuart Hall, and then St. Ignatius for high school. I'm a 6th generation Californian. A town is named after one of my great-great-grandfathers.

Tell us about your parents.

They were children of the Depression and taught me the importance of prudence and planning. My Dad was involved in recycling paper and cardboard since the 1950's. He was one of the founders of the Guardsmen. My mother formed and ran a small PR firm in SF and volunteered extensively. She was on the SF Arboretum board (now the SF Botanical Garden) and was very involved in the Children's Theater organization.

Your Dad was way ahead of his time.

He was. He had our whole family separating out the recyclables from our garbage when I was a kid.

When you were in high school, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a Physicist. I really liked math and science and got good grades. To me, Physics was about how things worked and I loved that.

Where did you go to college?

I went to the University of Virginia where I was invited into the Echols Scholar Program. I started as a Physics major, overdid it, and switched to Economics and Theater. Many of my electives were from the undergraduate business school.

My grandfather was an Attorney, so I applied to law school and went to what was called Hastings, now University of California College of the Law, San Francisco. Later, I got an MBA in Tax.

How did you become interested in Tax? Tax is pretty hard core.

I was inspired by a really good law school professor in Tax. Then I got a job working for a San Francisco law firm's Tax Department in law school. I liked taxes and I found that the estate planning part of it was intellectually challenging. It's like playing a huge chess game.

How is estate planning like playing a huge chess game?

Estate planning, if you are doing it right, involves knowledge of a long list of subjects and issues. Clients have complicated lives and want smart outcomes. When I'm advising clients, I'm constantly making side notes about related issues to return to in future conversations.

Related issues like what?

Good estate planning requires knowledge of most of the financial, legal and tax topics that impact people, such as lending and debt; property titling; financial instruments and scams, probate and trust administration issues and alternative solutions, how securities markets work; community vs. separate property, spousal rights, property rights, and practical solutions to problems. Sometimes just helping people understand what they have done and own can be very helpful to them.

As an Estate Planning Attorney, I'm helping people plan for the balance of their lives as well as after they pass. I need to think about people's financial and legal lives through transitions of illness or death and then to the next generation.

Sometimes that planning involves different entities including corporations, LLCs and trusts, and sometimes multiple generational trusts. And I have to be aware of the potential for conflicting interests

among all the people involved and suggest how to avoid or resolve them.

To be good in my field, you have to know enough about most of these things to be able to spot the issues. You may not have the answers but you need to be able to say "This may be a problem. Here is how I define the issue, but you should consult an expert in this."

How is it a plus for your clients that you understand tax law?

Most people don't know much about tax law. It has its own logic. And I sometimes end up as a family counselor.

What do mean by being a "family counselor"?

The best practice is for parents to involve their adult children in their planning. In my field, we have a saying "Fair is not equal and equal may not be fair." I need to spark that discussion in families. Also sometimes children inherit things they don't understand such as a property-owning LLC. I advise them of things to consider. I ask them the questions they don't know to ask.

Why does someone need an attorney like you?

Someone needs an experienced estate attorney because they have assets—a home, a family business, an investment portfolio. California has written an estate plan for you, whether you like it or not. Also probate or similar processes are once-in-a-lifetime processes. People don't know the jargon, the deadlines, or the traps for the unwary.

Unless we put their plans into an appropriate and valid writing, what will happen is not what they want.

And nowadays, we're all living longer. That means we all need to plan for our own incapacity. What is my plan if I get to the point where I don't know what day it is? Or I can't sign a check? Who will take care of that for me? At a minimum one needs a plan for who's in charge if you can't be in charge yourself.

When do people first seek you out?

That really varies. Here is one situation: Someone comes to me and says his father just died and left him a business in a corporation and two property-owning LLCs. He needs guidance about business and real estate ownership and how those types of entities are run, how the state and Feds tax entities and their assets, and what filings to make to avoid penalties.

More often, it's someone seeking to set up their estate. I start by asking my client to whom their assets should pass. Or should an asset be sold? And, when they can no longer run things, who do they want to be in charge? Maybe they should name a bank because their kids will fight like dogs and cats? Putting all of the kids or the oldest in charge is common, but it's not always the best idea.

Let's talk more about your personal life. When did you move to Kent Woodlands?

I started working in Marin in 1976 and was commuting north from San Francisco. I met Cindy in 1979 at a St Francis Yacht Club event and we were married in 1981. We moved to Mill Valley in 1981. In 1986, we moved to the Kent Woodlands house we live in now. We have 3 daughters, all of them computer engineers of one sort or another, and 4 grandchildren, all under age 3.

We always close with this question: What do you love most about living here?

Firstly, I love Mt. Tam and its environs, forests, trails, lakes and ocean views. Secondly, I like the people here. Many of those I know now grew up in San Francisco, but escaped to Marin to raise their children and have a bit more room. Thirdly, I really appreciate the planning that resulted in the three distinct parts of our County: the open areas, the agricultural areas and the 101 built up corridor.

For more information about Seacology, including opportunities to travel with Seacology: https://www.seacology.org/what-we-do