

About Elizabeth and Bob Erickson:

Elizabeth Ogren Erickson is a graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Dental Hygiene and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business. **Dr. Robert Erickson** is a graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry. Together, Bob and Elizabeth practiced Implant and General Dentistry in Madison, Wisconsin. After leaving private practice, Bob spent ten years as a clinical director for a school of dentistry.

In pursuit of new challenges, new adventures, and new learning experiences, the couple explored different areas of the United States for 15 years. Their travels brought them to the Coachella Valley in 2015, where they discovered Friends of the Desert Mountains and the University of California-Riverside, Palm Desert. They were so impressed with the volunteer opportunities and quality of adult education that they sold their Wisconsin home and moved to La Quinta. The two were students in the inaugural California Naturalist Program in 2018.

In addition to being certified California Naturalists, Elizabeth is a National Association for Interpretation certified interpretive guide, a community scientist, an outreach liaison volunteer, and a board member with Friends of the Desert Mountains, and Bob is vice president of La Cantera Home Owners Association.

UCR PALM DESERT: When you first came to the Coachella Valley, had you been looking for a new place to call home?

Yes, for at least 15 years. We both prefer to be warm, instead of cold. We both prefer sunshine and blue skies, instead of clouds, and rain or snow. We did not want to experience any form of freezing precipitation, snow, sleet, or freezing rain any longer. We are happy to look up at snow on Mount San Jacinto or San Gorgonio, from the Coachella Valley floor, and yet that's as close as we want to be to snow.

UCRPD: Did either one of you have any trepidation moving here?

Absolutely no trepidation in making this change. We explored so many places over the years that we knew La Quinta and the Coachella Valley were the answer for us. Our wish list included sunshine, blue skies, warm temperatures, no form of freezing precipitation, good air quality, a university, excellent adult education, a diverse community, friendly people, and excellent volunteer opportunities, and we found it all in the Coachella Valley.

UCRPD: What was the moment you knew the Coachella Valley could be your new home?

Elizabeth read a Palm Springs magazine article that said the first place that we should go to in the Coachella Valley was the Visitors Center at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. There we met Judy Colgero, a U.S. Forest Service employee, who introduced us to Friends of the Desert Mountains, the official support organization for the National Monument, and to the excellent educational programs at the University of California-Riverside, Palm Desert Center. We went on two interpretive hikes with Friends and knew that was where we wanted to volunteer. We attended lectures at UCRPD, and were truly AMAZED by the excellent caliber of the adult education, for which Elizabeth especially thanks Tamara Hedges, Dr. Cameron Barrows, and Tod Goldberg. Both of those opportunities helped us to realize that the Coachella Valley could be our new home.

Elizabeth will always remember the first time walking into an open house at our soon-to-be La Quinta home. After all the houses that we looked at, in all the different communities and different states, and over all those years, we looked at each other, and said, “This is it! We finally found it!”

UCRPD: What drew you to the California Naturalist Program?

Elizabeth and Bob are Wisconsin Master Gardeners, a program that was developed to share research-based information with members of a community, since there simply are not enough scientists, and to encourage volunteerism. (Bob is a generalized WiMG; Elizabeth is a specialized WiMG. Elizabeth also served as a board member for Olbrich Botanical Society at Olbrich Botanical Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin.)

When Dr. Cameron Barrows, UCRPD research ecologist, first talked about the California Naturalist training that he was developing, he likened it to the Master Gardener Program on a natural history level. Elizabeth loves learning new things, so she was immediately interested.

UCRPD: What excites you most about being certified California Naturalists now?

Since Elizabeth says she is “On the Learning Curve for Life,” it is all of the opportunities to learn more! The realization that there is so much more to experience in our Desert Sands and Sky Islands. Elizabeth heard a speaker at UCRPD estimate that less than 25% of the plants and animals in the desert have been categorized. Think how much more there is for us to discover!

UCRPD: This is a very different environment than where you’re originally from. What has surprised you most about the desert?

In Wisconsin, a single leaf is larger than Elizabeth’s hand, so one major surprise is that the plants (flowers and leaves) and animals (spiders and beetles) can be so tiny, a fraction of the size of a penny. A person has to have their “I spy” eyes on to see them. Often, it is a matter of taking a picture to post to iNaturalist, enlarging the picture, and noticing what else is in the picture. Or, it is a matter of noticing the slightest movement, and then noticing a tiny spider or beetle. The other surprise is that we still thoroughly enjoy looking at our mountains, and never tire of seeing their snow-covered peaks, alluvial fans, or bajadas.