

WHALEBONE

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THE MAN THAT SAVED TRES PALMAS

We are all out there trying to catch a wave, ride a wave, but not many can say they saved a wave. Well, Leon Richter can. A coastal activist, conservationist and surfer at heart, Leon met his wife Allison Jones out in the lineup at Ditch in 2002. What makes Leon a standout is his ability and willingness to take the alternative path and the long view. And because of him, Rincon, Puerto Rico has changed, and is still changing, for the better.

Leon's life choices convey a strong thread of healthy rebelliousness—Brown over Wharton, Buenos Aires over law school, fostering irreverent company culture long before that was a thing, and yes, flying down to Rincon with Surfrider, just after 9/11, when everyone said “don't go.”

Stop the Project, Save the Wave—Surfrider Days

Nudged by Chad Nelson (current CEO of [Surfrider](https://www.surfrider.org/)), Leon threw his pioneering self into an eight-year-long grassroots coalition effort organizing the Rincon community in a fight against three large scale developments proposed at Tres Palmas. “To help unlock local emotions and energy to create change, we used simple tools such as a three ring binder sporting images of a reef, a wave, a humpback whale and tropical fish. These petition binders were bilingual and held political impact power, resulting in over 14,000 signatures.”

In addition to petitions, Leon helped organize beach cleanups, trash can installations, and an array of educational programs. “Traditionally, the community's back was to the ocean. The ocean was where you dumped stuff, and for the longest time, the poorest people lived

on the beach, facing the road. So, we had to work to alter that mindset and help them see the ocean as a resource, not a dumping ground.”

“ We spent so much time in the schools, and what’s cool, as you can imagine, is that some of those kids from those first beach cleanups are now PhD’s in environmental studies, and they have become the coastal warriors. ”

Leon spoke affectionately about “this one coral reef conservation project where we partnered with the fisherman to remove, through free-diving, over 500 tires from the waters off Tres. We followed that up with Artes de Aquatica, where middle school students attended talks given by marine scientists and fishermen, and could then attend an extracurricular art event to paint the themes, which were then assembled into a book. Then they went home and taught their grandmothers about the reef.”

The fishermen were reluctant at first and antagonistic, but over time they became Surfrider’s strongest collaborators. To illustrate, Leon adds, “The fish monger who staged a protest against the marine reserve now travels the world as a leader advocating for marine protection.”

At the same time, Surfrider commissioned an economic study that became the birth of what is now known as surfonomics. “We were able to articulate the value of surfing, providing data that it can be an economic stimulant. Clearly, Rincon is a unique community within Puerto Rico because it has waves. And let’s be honest, without the waves this would just be another backwater town with a troubled economy. I wouldn’t be here, you wouldn’t be here.”

“So what makes Tres Palmas unique is the reef, and the dominant reef species is the elkhorn coral, and it happens to be one of the healthiest communities in US territory waters. Other than it’s beauty and complex structure it also only grows in 5-15 feet of

depth, and is available near shore, so it's super accessible, which was an important aspect in our case. The prevalent practices of development would have resulted in a high degree of sedimentation and runoff and who knows what other pollutants would have killed the reef and more than likely impacted the wave and the coast."

So, after winning the battle at Tres to stop development, the coalition affected more permanent protection by creating the first marine reserve in Puerto Rico. And ultimately Leon's work with Surfrider became a blueprint, or white paper, for how to effect this change elsewhere.

"We successfully cultivated a conservation ethic and wove that into the fabric of the community through education programs. We spent so much time in the schools, and what's cool, as you can imagine, is that some of those kids from those first beach cleanups are now PhD's in environmental studies, and they have become the coastal warriors."

Leon points out that they had "to work ourselves out of the equation" so the community could be equipped to defend itself. They then came up with a new concept called co-management to help manage the marine reserve with different stakeholders and "ultimately it's managed by the community, and has rendered me obsolete, which was the goal."

A Shift in Focus, from Sea to Land

Coastal protection now on auto pilot, so Leon went ahead and knocked down the door on sustainable food sourcing in Rincon. He got the idea when he started making trips back to California and stopped for a green juice at Mr. G's. "I began to think about how we could make that back in Puerto Rico and about the land sea connection. The choices we make every day impact the ocean, and yea we have this great marine reserve, but if we pave the whole watershed or use chemicals and fertilizers, that's going to ruin it."

"And really, I just wanted a place to eat food from Puerto Rico, and have it be delicious and healthy. Carta Buena(<http://www.cartabuena.com/>) was born at Tres Palmas and we were one of the first members of CSA (Community Support Agriculture). I thought a lot about carbon footprint and impact. It made no sense to me that there was abundance all around us, but we were eating from scarcity. If the shipment didn't come in, we couldn't eat spinach. Four years ago, you couldn't get a smoothie in Rincon."

Photo: Lisa Miller

Leon wanted to prove it could be done and “to inspire others to elevate the quality of their offering through sustainable sourcing” and to highlight the tastes of Puerto Rico. “I want people to taste the flavors of what grows in Puerto Rico when you come here.” Proof that Leon’s instincts were right on—since Carta Buena opened four years ago, more than 40 new health food businesses have opened up.

Leon adds, “You couldn’t eat a mango off a menu, but you could have your windshield broken by a falling one...” And at that very moment a green mango fell off the tree above us almost knocking over my watermelon juice, landing on the grass between our Adirondack chairs with a loud thud.

Leon’s dog, Miss Snickerdoodle Bruiser, sat completely unfazed, but Leon and I were both caught off guard, and laughed at the timing. We then paused, as some satisfied and salty surfers passed through Leon’s community gate, carrying boards past Leon’s vegetable garden while the birds coqui-coquied and the lawnmower revved into high gear. I just wish they knew to thank Leon for their morning surf session at Tres.

Almost as an aside, Leon mentioned his current COO position for a large and growing telecom company and his successful foray into local real estate, in the form of Dos Ceibas development. As an environmentalist, Leon has run that project by prioritizing sustainable strategies such as breathing houses, the first green roof in Western Puerto Rico, low light pollution, and the first underground utilities.

Looking Into the Horizon

Leon wants to keep pressing forward in his business ventures, keeping sustainability at the forefront. He wants to raise more appreciation for local Rincon flavors, while preserving the local bounty of land (his garden just doubled in size) and sea.

“A lofty goal of mine is to be able to impact the nutrition and dietary and consumer habits of Puerto Rico by exposing the general population to what is available here. I can’t replicate Carta Buena, but we could recreate the culinary experience, sourcing from growers, stimulating local economy and agriculture, reducing our carbon footprint, sustainable sourcing, and creating jobs.” Leon admits to obstacles such as Puerto Rican mindsets and palates that still prefer fries and container-delivered foods, so yes, he has a long road (to happiness) ahead, here in Rincon, and if anyone has the vision and patience to see it through, it’s Leon.

You can find Leon, to thank him for your Rincon smoothie and surf session, at Surfrider’s Two Coasts: One Ocean fundraiser(<https://www.surfrider.org/two-coasts-one-ocean>) in Montauk

on Saturday July 8th.



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