Everyone selected has a heartening tale: the mother who fought to get dyslexia-assistance programs into the schools; the retired couple who raise money to buy goats and cows for Rwandan genocide survivors; and the cycling enthusiast who puts about 1,300 new bikes into the hands of young riders every year. And with tenacity, each of the following heroes has fought tirelessly to bring their visions of helping others to fruition.

The Friendship Paddle: Community-Powered Hope

When John McFadden’s brother Doug McFadden was diagnosed in 2003 with an inoperable brain tumor, John and their wide circle of friends and family organized themselves into an ocean-venturing flotilla of support and solidarity. Launching their paddle boards at sunrise from Santa Cruz Island’s Forney’s Cove, 50 men and women made the 24-mile journey across the dark, choppy Santa Barbara Channel — tasting, for a moment, Doug’s uncertainty and isolation. “We wanted to do it in honor of Doug,” explained John. “We wanted to share in the fear of the unknown.” The group landed at Hope Ranch Beach later in the day and was greeted with hugs and tears. “It was magic,” said John.

Thus, the Friendship Paddle was born, an annual relay of paddlers that takes place in the channel in the fall. While the first paddle wasn’t designed to (and didn’t) raise any funds, the nonprofit has organically morphed into a vehicle through which money is collected and then donated to a selected beneficiary every year. The cash is meant to take care of financial worries like the mortgage and bills — “The tedious parts of life,” said John — so the recipient can stop working for a while and spend time with his or her family.

So far, the Friendship Paddle has raised more than $1 million, most recently hosting an event for a longtime city firefighter with cancer. A number of area businesses donate food and equipment every year, and a fleet of fishermen volunteer to escort participants during their journey. In 2008, a junior version of the Paddle was started — The Keiki Paddle. Primarily meant to foster an appreciation for life and celebrating the present, John
thread the needle. He’s unfazed by the prospect of backing his truck up a steep, winding driveway with little clearance on either side. Once, he removed both of his side-view mirrors to deliver a roll-off box down a particularly long and narrow passage. After the recent spate of wildfires, Banales was in high demand by households in distress, delivering roll-off boxes under the most precarious of circumstances.

There’s more to Banales’s talent than art for art’s sake: By placing a roll-off box close to the construction (or demolition) site—as opposed to 250 feet away—he saves customers incalculable time and money. A native of Mexico who moved to Santa Barbara in 1968, Banales is also both a chef and a shaman. His recipes for food and medicinal potions usually begin the same way—with 10 heads of garlic (that’s heads, not cloves)—and are as intricate and precise as his driving. “The trick is to not be nervous,” he explained. “I’ve been doing this so long, I never get nervous.”

**Bren School of Environmental Science & Management: Eco-Problem Solvers**

Academia is notorious for producing smart people with lots of degrees but few real-world skills. The Bren School of Environmental Science & Management at UCSB is shaking that model to its core by annually churning out practically trained graduates who relish working in teams on the world’s most pressing ecological problems.

Created as a two-year master’s degree program in 1994 and now graduating about 80 or so students per year—not to mention the roughly 50 people working on PhDs—the Bren School’s mission, according to the current dean, Steve Gaines, is to answer this question: “How do we tap the creativity and bring together complementary disciplines to solve these complex environmental problems and do it in a way where we pick up the pace and make those solutions happen faster than the problems?” To do so, they attract students from across the globe with backgrounds in everything from biology and physics to economics and art, put them together into teams of four to six, and then solicit environmental problems from actual agencies and companies to be solved as each groups’ thesis project. In terms of environmental studies, it’s a revolutionary and world-changing model.

Both Gaines and Jeff Dozier, the school’s first dean (from 1994 to 2000), credit UCSB’s focus on interdisciplinary studies as the perfect Petri dish. “We wanted to do it in a way that supported the strengths of the campus itself,” explained Dozier, who also said that the greening of the school’s buildings has made their mission much more clear, which makes students happier and easier to teach. “This is a school that really believes in what it’s teaching.”

**Ed Graper: Goleta’s Graffiti Fighter**

In an age of graffiti gone wild, Goleta’s walls are refreshingly free from spray-painted signatures. That’s thanks almost solely to the efforts of Edward Graper, who started painting over tags about 14 years ago and now oversees a volunteer program that covers 4,000 or so tags per year from Puente Drive to the Bacara.

It started when Graper was president of the Rotary Club of Goleta Noontime and the need for graffiti removal arose, so he painted over the first spray-painted wall himself. “The next day, I looked at it and thought, ‘This is kind of awesome,’” recalled Graper, who now mixes the paint himself, pays for most of the expenses, and coordinates a team of about five people who paint over tags and 10 folks who will call in to report new vandalism.

“We will clean up anything,” said Graper. His fast and constant work has made Goleta a less alluring place to spray paint, as your tags rarely get seen by anyone else. “Most of the taggers have been driven out,” said Graper. “It’s no fun, and they get arrested.”