

THE PATH OF A COMMUNITY PARTNER

BY EVA HARRIS, COMMUNITY PARTNER, '00

May, 1998. Rain, sleet and snow in the previous week seemed to make it safe to burn pine needles and understory as we have done periodically over thirty years. The effect of an overnight weather change removing moisture was under-estimated. A wind shift scattered burning needles across the firebreak at our property line and flames exploded up the draw on Bureau of Land Management public lands that had not burned in a hundred and fifty years. By evening, two hundred acres of Little Canyon Mountain were engulfed in flames.

This is the event that brought Stefan Bergman to our door two years later in the summer of 2000. This event has also led to a project that is in its formative stages to address cross-boundary (private/public) lands restoration on Little Canyon Mountain. My involvement as a community partner with Stefan created a thread that seems to have brought me full circle back to the event and the place that started it all.

Stefan was a forestry student at Oregon State University working on his masters thesis. He was examining the challenges of managing landscapes that involved private and public lands and the use of fire as a cross-boundary management tool. Our fire certainly crossed the boundary, a private prescribed burn that went very public.

Stefan spent several hours in our home interviewing us, one couple among many he interviewed as he collected material for his thesis. Later that summer he invited me to be his community representative for his presentation at the Community Forestry Research Fellowship Workshop at Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, New Mexico, in October of that year. I came home from those sessions with a wealth of new information and new friends.

My involvement in Stefan's project and my trip to New Mexico became known in my community of John Day, Oregon, and I was invited to speak about community forestry at a public forum that January. The John Day valley lies at three thousand feet elevation in the heart of Grant County, Oregon, a county of forty-five hundred square miles, seventy-eight hundred people and three sawmills. Our communities have been very dependent on timber, ranching and the Federal and State Governments for their livelihoods with very little economic diversification. The forum at which I made my presentation was organized by a small group of citizens to not-so-gently twist the arm of the Malheur National Forest to release more timber and bigger timber for sale to the mills. The atmosphere in this gathering was not one of partnering with anyone. Using the Ponderosa Pine Partnership [Colorado] and Las Montañas de Truchas [New Mexico] as examples, my presentation was all about partnering.

This portion of the evening was given cursory mention in the local newspaper article that focused primarily on what the Forest Service was not doing for the mills. But some individuals in attendance did take note that "there is another way we might do business in Grant County." These people are surfacing a year and a half later to participate with the Little Canyon Mountain project.

Little changed in our communities after that meeting; arm twisting pressures continued to be placed on the Malheur National Forest as they still are today, with continued demands to supply the timber volume necessary to keep three mills profitable and their employees on the job.

In the mean time I was offered the opportunity to attend the first of four workshops on conflict resolution presented by the Consensus Institute of Terrebonne, Oregon. The Malheur National Forest offered to pay the registration fee for that first session. I was quickly hooked on the techniques being taught and wanted to attend the remaining sessions.

My search for funding led me back to Louise Fortmann of the University of California at Berkeley, whom I had met at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. In asking her guidance in finding a grant she proposed that her chair, the Rudy Grah chair, fund the remaining registration fees. I readily and gratefully accepted. Fourteen months later I have completed the training.

A three-day workshop, entitled “Accelerating Cooperative Riparian Restoration and Management”, was given by the National Riparian Service Team in Prineville, Oregon, in the spring of 2001. Expanding my knowledge and adding new skills, I was becoming more comfortable addressing many of the social, cultural and economic challenges in my natural resource-dependent communities.

Later that fall I signed a contract with the Malheur National Forest as a volunteer to work within the local agency as a facilitator and co-facilitator helping agency personnel face their challenges internally as well as their relationship with the public. My knowledge base continues to grow.

Other opportunities have arisen for me to use my skills. The county supremacy movement is gaining some momentum in our county with the passage, in the most recent primary elections, of two local county measures. One measure declares this county a United Nations free zone, the other declares the citizens’ right to enter public lands for the purpose of natural resource management in the event citizens determine that the managing agency is not acting in the best interest of the citizens. According to the measure “best interest of the citizens” is defined in a Custom and Culture document, adopted as a resolution by the County Court in a previous year. A public meeting was held this spring by the same group that organized the January 2001 meeting. Offering to facilitate, I wanted to set an example of a gathering in which both sides of the issue were presented, with no one faction or individual dominating the process. My effort was successful and I look forward to more opportunities to bring civility to our local public meetings.

The Malheur National Forest sponsored a three-day workshop this spring on Community-Based Partnerships and Ecosystems in which forty local citizens with diverse interests, including local public agencies, participated. The training was provided by the National Training Center of Phoenix, AZ, with one of the instructors being Todd Bryan whom I had met at Ghost Ranch when Stefan and I gave our presentation. Todd remembered Grant County.

One of the small group assignments was to create a project that the participants thought could actually be accomplished, which would build community relationships and contribute to the improvement of the local economy. From this exercise came the seed of an idea for a Little Canyon Mountain project. Not long after the workshop was over I discovered that three of the individuals who were in that group had decided to pursue the idea. One of those three people had heard my community forestry presentation sixteen months earlier. I asked to join one of their meetings and out of that came my position as facilitator.

We have come full circle from our fire in 1998 on Little Canyon Mountain to the seeds of an idea for a community forestry project to bring the urban interface on the edge of the mountain into a healthy state, providing a healthy environment for recreationists and reducing the opportunity for property-damaging fires.

As I have traveled this circle, threads have continually drawn me back to Ghost Ranch and the people I met there.