

What we see depends on where we stand

Have you ever watched strangers interacting outside a bus (or train or car) window and found yourself creating a story in your mind to explain their conversation? Or wondered about the lives of people in the houses you pass as you drive along I-5 or meander along Highway 58, 99, or 126? This imaginative exercise can be diverting when faced with a long drive, but we generally recognize that our internal storytelling is fiction rather than fact.

It was not long after my wife and I traded our urban lives in northern California for our current reality as small woodland owners up the McKenzie in East Lane County that we realized how many of those entertaining fictions colored our perception of our new rural neighbors.

What we soon learned was that many – if not most – of those preconceptions were woefully inadequate and, many times, utterly wrong.

In my career as an educator, I started each school year reminding my students that what we see depends on where we stand—a valuable touchstone for encountering any unfamiliar landscape, personal or academic.

‘Expanding our vision’

Far from invalidating one’s own place in the world and the perspectives it has engendered, it is a call to recognize and embrace them – and then to be intentional about stepping into a new place and expanding our vision.

That is what happened for us when we moved to Vida and began to learn what is involved in caring for (not just about) a piece of land. The Holiday Farm Fire and the damage it did to our small forest taught (and continues to teach) us even more: every year, every season, every day. We learned from people who knew more than we did. And what we learned altered our perceptions.

And that is what attracted us to Lane Families for Farms & Forests. With a mission of harnessing support for Lane County’s rich heritage of agriculture and forestry, LFFF recognizes and celebrates these two pillars of our county – and the women and men whose daily, boots-on-the-ground (or in the mud) efforts feed and house and employ many people in our community.

LFFF also recognizes that many people who only see farms and forests from their vehicles don’t really know what keeps those farms and forests vibrant and productive.

As one of the founding members of LFFF, Marie Bowers said in a 2017 article in the Capital Press, “We can’t expect people to learn if we’re not willing to share...Our goal is to be a resource for people.”

In the coming year, members of Lane Families for Farms & Forests will be contributing to a monthly column in The Chronicle to be that resource, to provide an avenue for local farmers and forest landowners to share their stories, their “View from Forests & Fields,” and provide Chronicle readers a chance to step to a new location and see something new.

With 95% of farms in Lane County being family farms and over 3600 individuals and families stewarding the 42% of our county’s forestland that is privately owned, there is a wealth of opportunity for all of us to broaden our vision, to trade our internal stories for actual ones, to bridge some of the misperceptions that divide us and to celebrate the rich heritage of working lands that blesses Lane County residents every day.

We look forward to sharing the journey with you.

Kate McMichael is a small woodland owner in Vida, Oregon, and a member of Lane Families for Farms & Forests. To learn more about LFFF, visit our website: lanefamilies.com

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