

A forest-and-fire journey: Not the retirement I ever imagined

I'm standing along the wall at the Walterville Grange, looking out over 40-some people gathered for a Lane Families for Farms & Forests tour up the McKenzie, focused on working forestry and ag lands and their relationship to watershed health.

I hear my name and refocus to introduce the group to Lane County Small Woodland Association, the tour's co-sponsor.

This is not the retirement I'd imagined.

I'm walking backward down a gravel road, leading part of the same group on a short hike to one of our woodland's riparian areas, introducing them to "Grandmother," a towering, fire-killed matriarch who lives on as a wildlife tree.

This is not the retirement I'd imagined.

After decades of work demanding a high degree of interactivity (from inner-city faith and justice work to high school campus ministry and teaching), our retirement plan was to become people who didn't join groups or do things.

Having sunk our retirement savings into a 39-acre woodland property up the McKenzie, our dream was to spend our days just hanging out with our trees – with an occasional hiking, camping or backpacking trip thrown in for variety.

Labor Day 2020 changed all that.

Every fire survivor has a story. Amidst the shock and loss and heartache, ours has been interwoven with astonished gratitude at the outpouring of love and support, assistance, and counsel from the forestry and timber community. Even though we were out-of-state, forest illiterate newcomers, the warmth and care made us feel like we belonged, like we were family.

Snapshots include:

- Driving home from trying to fight the unfightable, Weyerhaeuser and Giustina workers took detours through our property to give us status reports on the devastation
- Our forester-realtor, Extension forester and a consulting forester we'd met only days before the fire were among the first people to call, making sure we were okay
- Our ODF stewardship forester was an early post-fire visitor, sharing the grief and helping us see a way forward
- A local forestry supplier gifted us with planting bags
- Every year, a box of seedlings has made its way from Giustina to us — and the first year's delivery included a lesson in how to plant them.

Our experience of the forest sector in a nutshell: so much generosity, so little fanfare.

We have a "gratitude wall" in our home. On it are pictures of people who have been a part of our forest-and-fire journey, from builders to loggers to tree planters. In the center is a quote from Kathleen Dean Moore that has become a touchstone for our post-fire lives: "To be grateful is to live a life that honors the gift."

Forsaking our original retirement plan, honoring the many gifts we have received means our calendars are now filled with forestry-related meetings and commitments: Lane County Small Woodlands

Association, Oregon Tree Farm System, Committee for Family Forestlands, Oregon Women in Timber, Lane Families for Farms and Forests, and more.

Among the things we've learned, in the aftermath of the life-altering event that was the Holiday Farm Fire, is that the women and men who work on our working lands are true conservationists.

Day in and out, forestry professionals care FOR forests, not just ABOUT them. No matter the number of acres, the commitment of forest owners and managers runs deep: to sustainable, resilient forests; to healthy watersheds; to abundant wildlife habitat; to doing the work of caring for working lands for the benefit of people who need homes, clean water, or just lumber for a weekend diy project.

And – as we discovered firsthand, over and over again – forest sector folks are big-hearted and generous and welcoming, even to unknown newcomers from California who didn't want to join groups or do things.

This is not the retirement I'd imagined.

To my surprise, even including a catastrophic, stand replacing, life-changing fire, it's better.

Kate McMichael, with her wife, Theresa, owns and manages 39 acres of burned woodland in the footprint of the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire. She wrote this for The Chronicle.

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