Of Cookies, Forests, and Belonging
By Ann Stinson

It was a wet, dark, November night. Fog rolled in over the Chehalis, Cowlitz, and Nisqually rivers. But a hundred and more people put on their better-than-usual clothes and gathered in the meeting room at the Veterans' Memorial Museum. Who were these people? Why did they leave their warm homes? They were small forest landowners, people who often prefer trees and animals to humans, but who know the value of community.

Cookies Equal Community

Each year, my local chapter of Washington Farm Forestry Association, the Lewis County chapter, holds a raffle to raise funds for operating expenses and scholarships. It's a grand time. We eat dinner, see presentations of award-winning tree farms, and anticipate who will win the freshly picked cranberries, the hand carved sign, or the Stihl chainsaw. A couple years ago I decided to donate a batch of homemade cookies a month. I love to bake but need eaters. I made a sign with photos of cookies stating they would be made with lots of butter, sugar, and nuts and waited to see who would win. Each item has a jar for raffle tickets and whatever child is around gets to put their hand in the jar, choose a winner, and deliver the item. This year, when the winner was announced, it was a man I didn't know. I was a little disappointed – part of the fun has been to chat with the winner each month, but I figured I'd get to know someone new. After the raffle, I made my way through the crowd to find him and arrange the first delivery. But on the way saw Barb Grega, who had just been awarded a tree farm award, with my cookie sign. I looked at her quizzically. She said, "My grandson, William, really wanted those cookies. When the other man won, William said, 'Oh no! I put ALL my tickets in that jar.' The man heard and graciously gave William the prize." For the last two months I've received photos of a very happy William with a mouthful of cookie.

William enjoying his cookies

SFLO Organization's Membership Holds Steady Amidst a National Decline

This kind of heartwarming generosity can only happen when people get together. The phrase "building community" is an interesting one. "Community" implies people who may or may not be close friends–but who share a common goal– people giving their time and resources. In recent decades in the United States, many volunteer groups have lost members. In 2000, sociologist Robert Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In the book he gives statistics showing a decline in membership in organizations like the Lions Club, Parent Teacher Associations, etc. This decline, Putnam argues, has caused an erosion of "social capital," which includes networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation. The idea of building community has taken on a sort of urgency, a return to a more civic minded past.

During this decline, WFFA and the other small forest landowner organizations represented by this magazine have seen our membership stay steady. Why, I wonder. I think we can thank our trees, our forests for holding us strong. People who spend time among the Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, hemlock, and alder have deep roots. We are more patient. Once, when I was talking to a politician visiting our woods, I said, "Anytime you have a meeting about something with historic importance, you should invite a tree farmer to the table–we have a different view of time." She smiled and replied, "Like the Ents?" Ents are the half tree/half human creatures in Tolkien' s Lord or the Ring series. They think and speak slowly and carefully. This mode of life serves us well and can be an example for our fractured society. We may hold very different political views, which normally might keep us out of each other's social circles, but trees bring us together. We can see each other's humanity as we talk about our most recent attempts at preventing deer browse or exclaiming about a cougar we saw on our game cams.

Small forest landowners also know that life is a matter of reciprocity, like the mycelium and plant roots feeding each other, like mosses calibrating the drip of a February rain. We know we need each other. We are not "volunteering," we are meeting with peers, sharing knowledge about how to best tend our forests. We are sharing the love of our land. And we know it's important for the non-forest-understanding-public to start to learn. When we gather and learn, there is a better chance for that knowledge to start making its way into the public sphere. This year, WFFA's annual meeting in Spokane is going to be open to the public–we want to invite people into our community, to welcome them and introduce them to the joys (and frustrations) of loving the land.

It's ironic really that our organizations have flourished while others have not–many of us are introverts who are happiest out in the woods– but we have. What makes people want to show up to a big room on a cold and rainy night in November? I think the WFFA's annual auction is so successful because it combines many characteristics that help bring people together. First, there is food. Second, it allows people to showcase their gifts. Third, it gives people a chance to be

generous. Fourth, the award presentation provides a time to celebrate all the hard work and joy of tending the forest. Fifth, it's like "old home" week– you can count on seeing other tree farmers you haven't seen since last year. Sixth, the planning and preparation necessary to make the auction happen creates a community all on its own.

How to Build a Community

How do you create that first, small, founding community? The Lewis County Chapter is a well-established chapter that meets ten times a year. We have long-time leaders with deep institutional knowledge and amazing organizational skills. That is hard to replicate. But it can be done. How does one start building a community of small forest landowners from scratch? In addition to food and giving a chance for people to use their gifts, educational events, especially tree farm tours and events with hands-on activities can attract a crowd.

Some examples:
Last year, the Washington branch of Women Owning Woodlands organized a wildflower walk that brought over fifty people to our tree farm. Participants shared their expertise about various flowers, shrubs, and mosses we saw.

Women Owning Woodlands wildflower walk

At the Clark County Chapter annual picnic, children made tic-tac-toe games out of wood. Large wood cookies were used for the board, and smaller wood cookies for the pieces. Every time a child comes to our house, this game gets played.

The Mt. Adams Chapter hosts a wreath making event each year.

What does your chapter do?

Attracting New Members

Building community also means continuing to attract new members. Recently WFFA has been working to increase visibility at local fairs and events hosted by WSU Extension, DNR, Conservation Districts–any group connected to the small forest landowner community. For years members have hosted booths at the Pacific County Fair, the Puyallup Fair, and WSU Extension field days. Recently the Mt Adams Chapter has been hosting a booth at the Underwood Conservation District's Tree Day in White Salmon. We are putting together "care packages" for each chapter so their booths can be more visually pleasing, informative, and interactive. We're including maps, coloring pages, brochures, roll-up displays, and other fun things. Our story is a good one. You cannot argue with tending a sustainable forest. People love trees. People love forests. They love people who tend forests. We need to get our story out there.

Social media can help. An online community can be a real community and lead to in person gatherings. I recently started a blog on Substack called "Tree Farm Tuesday: Musings from a Working Forest," and I'm amazed at the conversations that have happened there. People who have no idea about family forests learn things–today someone wrote, "I love how practical forestry is about working with nature's rhythms rather than against them." And I learn new things–last week I learned the difference between Pacific silver fir and white fir. Another person who found the blog is a local tree farmer and has expressed interest in attending one of the next Lewis County Farm Forestry events. I encourage all of you to share photos of your forest on any social media you have. Write a little note with each photo. Share posts from other small forest landowners.

Of course, the best way to build community is the old-fashioned way. Show up. Help organize events. Figure out what you're good at. Share those gifts. Get to know your neighbors. Find out what interests, skills they have. Invite them to use those interests. Make some cookies and give a kid a smile.

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