2006

Classroom on the Mountain

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Gabriel Del Rayo ’08 grasps a push pin as he crouches over a tree stump. Squinting in the bright sun, he carefully begins to count the number of rings, a painstaking process that will determine the age of the tree and indicate previous forest fires.

The odor of charred wood still hangs in the air three years after the B&B Complex fire burned 92,000 acres in the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests near the resort town of Sisters. Tree trunks are covered with blackened bark that rubs off at the touch of a hand and walking can be treacherous over the loosened soil. The wind can howl down the denuded hillsides, grinding dirt and ash into unprotected skin and making work an exhausting challenge. But it can also be exhilarating, as 11 Linfield College students will attest. In June, they spent five days in the burn area in the Deschutes National Forest learning about the history of fire in the Cascade Mountains and helping launch a fledgling research project. The course, Fire History of the Cascades, is one of several summer travel courses offered through Linfield’s Division of Continuing Education.

Instructor Peter Schoonmaker covers the science of forest fires and how science and politics guide national fire policy. The students get hands-on experience assessing the impact of fire. Depending on the outcome of the study, they may also get to influence plans for restoration as well as future state and federal fire policy regarding forest management.

“They get a real feel for the controversy about forest fire,” Schoonmaker said. “They develop an understanding—from the ground up—that this is a more complicated issue than just what they see in the news.”

With the burn area in its second growing season, Linfield students received a varied look at forest ecology. Much of their work centered on marking circular plots within a section of the burn area that had not been logged. Once the plots were marked, they combed the area—sometimes on hands and knees—counting the saplings that have begun growing. That data was entered into a computer program that compares growth rates between salvaged and non-salvaged areas.

The project is similar to a controversial study produced by an Oregon State University graduate student earlier this year, which concluded that forests will regenerate faster without salvage logging. Schoonmaker wanted to see if that hypothesis held up in another area. Once he has preliminary data, he’ll meet with foresters at the Sisters Ranger District to determine if the study is worth pursuing.

The intensity of the class surprised Tim Sackett ’07, a business systems analyst for Freightliner.

“In a very short time we got hands-on experience doing what people like Peter do for a living,” he said. Not only did Sackett learn about the interactions and interdependency between forest health and fire ecology, but he also got to experience the controversy about forest fire management.

“I learned a lot about the politics involved in managing the forest,” Sackett said. “I learned that what people like Peter do is very important.”

The students were not only learning about forest ecology but also about the controversy surrounding forest management. They were given a hands-on experience of what Peter Schoonmaker does for a living, and they got a real feel for the complexity of the issue. They also got to see the impact of fire on the forest and the challenges that come with it. 

Although the ground cover and saplings have begun growing in the B&B Complex burn area, the dead trees are a stark reminder of the fire three years ago. Jennifer Larson ’07 marks one of the trees to set the boundary of the plot she and her classmates will survey.
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The best part of the class was the chemistry among the students, said Chris Hukill ’09 from Monmouth, who works full time at Hewlett-Packard.

“We really bonded,” Hukill said. “Everyone had an attitude that fostered good learning and took it seriously. Everyone had respect for the learning and respect for the knowledge people brought to the class. It was good to have the diversity of age.”

Schoonmaker is the founding board president of Illahee, a non-profit organization that provides a forum for environmental innovators to exchange ideas and increase the scientific rigor of public discourse about the environment in the Pacific Northwest. He has worked with conservation organizations, government agencies and natural resource businesses to craft mutually beneficial forest, fisheries and watershed partnerships throughout the region.

Schoonmaker likes teaching field-based classes, where a question is posed and the students pursue an answer in the field, instead of the class being defined by a text. “In the course of asking a question, the students usually have to tackle all those things they see in a text and I think they learn it better,” he said. “They are learning the theory wholistically, in a hands-on way and I think at the end of the class they see the whole picture.”

“I learned the effects of wildfires in ecosystems and how they play a big role in saving forests. Thinning forests to reduce fuel buildup can make a big difference,” he said. “It was a fun class because I could see for myself how things are really done.”

The five-member court spent the spring and summer appearing at Pendleton grand entry, one of the most difficult entries in the Pacific Northwest. Riding Red, a 16-year-old sorrel gelding, Thompson entered the arena at a full gallop, jumped two fences, came to an abrupt halt in front of 20,000 spectators, then raced around the quarter-mile track twice – all one-handed while waving to the crowd.

“It’s dangerous,” Thompson admits. “It’s a pressure cooker for horses, too. A horse has a mind of its own so anything can happen.”

The Pendleton Roundup, which began in 1910, is practically a family affair for Thompson, who has attended the rodeo every year since age 5. Her grandfather has led the dress up parade for 42 years and family members are devoted volunteers. So it was only natural that Thompson, a skilled horsewoman, would take her turn in the spotlight.

The five-member court spent the spring and summer appearing at elementary schools, nursing homes, luncheons, banquets, rodeos and parades, leading up to the roundup. But Thompson was unfazed by the hectic schedule.

“It was lots of work, but the roundup organizers want to have girls representing them who are involved in their communities and doing something with their lives,” she said. “Those are the kinds of things Linfield looks for, too.”

As if the responsibilities of the rodeo weren’t enough, Thompson interned with Chris Cockburn ’91 of Fife, Cockburn and Co., LLP, an accounting firm in Pendleton. Cockburn is a director for Happy Canyon, affiliated with the roundup and understood the demands placed on Thompson.

“She’s probably accomplished more in 21 years than many people do in a lifetime,” Jones said. “She’s involved in so many different things and she’s usually at the top of the heap. I’m proud to know her.”

Jones traveled to Pendleton to watch Thompson “spin around the track on her horse at what seemed like 90 mph.” And he wasn’t the only Thompson fan there. Other Linfield community members also made the trip.

“Faculty and staff cheer you on,” said Thompson. “So many of them were excited for me when they found out I made court. A school like Linfield is interested in their students and wants to celebrate with them.”

——— Mardi Mileham

Riding high in Pendleton

With an effervescent smile, the graceful wave of a hand and lots of hooting and hollering, Darlene Thompson ’07 fulfilled a lifelong dream this summer.

Thompson, an accounting and math double major from Weston, served as a princess for the Pendleton Roundup, one of Oregon’s largest and most renowned rodeos.

“Ever since I was a little girl I’ve been going to the rodeo, sitting in the stands and waiting for my turn to be out there riding,” said Thompson.

The Pendleton Roundup in September when she successfully maneuvered the Pendleton grand entry, one of the most difficult entries in the Pacific Northwest. Riding Red, a 16-year-old sorrel gelding, Thompson entered the arena at a full gallop, jumped two fences, came to an abrupt halt in front of 20,000 spectators, then raced around the quarter-mile track twice – all one-handed while waving to the crowd.

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“The experience introduced me to a different side of accounting,” said Thompson, who audited school districts along with Ronna (Ayers) Lindstrom ’98. “I’m thinking about coming back to the area and this will help me decide.”

Now back on campus for her senior year, Thompson’s pace has not slowed. She sings in the choir and took part in the Opera Workshop performance last year. She played volleyball, served as a peer advisor and is a member of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Phi Sigma Sigma sorority and three national honor societies for business, service and academics.

This is a typical Thompson achievement, according to Mike Jones, professor of accounting and Thompson’s advisor.

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Student Profile