

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Barb Stewart

by Kyle Swanstrom

Barb Stewart, retired from the National Park Service as a fire communications specialist for Northeast and National Capitol Regions.

"After 33+ years with the NPS, I'm ending my tour of duty."

"In 1977 I became a Student Conservation Association volunteer at Shenandoah National Park. When my boss burst into my rodent-infested trailer and asked if I wanted to fight fire, I got my first paying job with the NPS as an AD firefighter. Shortly after that I got a 30-day emergency appointment as a GS-3 park aid. Then I went back to complete my senior year of college and all thoughts of law school were gone. I was going to be a park ranger."

"I spent many years at information desks as a front-line interpreter and supervisor. One memorable encounter came on a dreary day. Bill O'Donnell and I stood at the desk of the Dickey Ridge Visitor Center in Shenandoah. Everyone who made it in the door had driven at least 4.6 miles up a curvy mountain road in thick fog. A couple came in with personal storm clouds over their heads and 'don't touch me' body language.

"Bill and I stood quietly, available if they wanted something as they pretended to look at books in the lobby. After a few minutes, the husband looked over at us almost desperately. I asked, 'Sir, what can we do to make you happy?' He said: 'My wife wants to see a bear.' Without hesitation, Bill and I reached under the desk. He came up with the stuffed bear hand puppet and I had the 'Bear County' brochure with a black bear on the cover. We leaned over the desk with our offerings, not speaking, but hopeful. There was a surprised pause. And then, fortunately, he smiled. A moment later she did, too."

"In the '00's I became a regional fire communication specialist. Part of my job has been to serve as an information officer. One morning I looked over at a firefighter covered with sweat-smearred soot and asked him if he'd been out on the line all night, scrambling up and down the steep and rocky slopes. He said yes and I thanked him for his hard work. He looked at my clean yellow Nomex® shirt, shiny helmet and notepad and asked, 'Are you going to talk to reporters?' I said yes - and he thanked me."

Article from InsideNPS



Barb Stewart  
firefighter in 1977

**"I've worked with a lot of really good people, and if I took some of their lessons and passed them on in a meaningful way that would be great."**

## What makes you want to follow someone?

If someone is honest, positive, and headed in the right direction. I need to be able to agree with the goals, not necessarily be fully enthusiastic but, at least agree to them. The person needs to firmly believe that all of us need to survive this.

## Who do you think is a leadership role model and why?

I believe that everybody can teach me something about leadership, what to do and what not to do. I need to pay attention to the lessons and put them to work. Basically, I am continuously looking for leadership, and probably will until the day I die.

## Regarding leadership, what quote comes to mind?

"To know what you know and know what you don't know is characteristic of one who knows." (Lao-tzu). For me, the key is that I don't and cannot know everything about anything. So I have to keep that in mind. To compensate for that I will ask, 'what am I not asking? What are we not doing? What don't we know?' It does not mean that we can't make a decision; we can make a decision with limited information. We must recognize that this is incomplete information, however, and constantly evaluate and adapt as necessary.

## What do you consider your strengths to be?

I usually have a vision to start with. As an information officer on an incident this includes, 'we're going to get the best information to the people that care as soon as we can.' First, however, is 'we're going to survive the day intact, and then do this other thing.' I try to be competent. I work at being a good communicator, a better delegator. I am honest and sometimes it's 'I'm not doing this right, or I can't see clearly, or my vision is prejudiced.' That's when, if no one's pointed out my issue, I need to ask for other peoples' help. I try to respect people and their opinions. I work at being a lifelong learner, I'm not always there, but at least I work at it. I do a pretty good job from separating performance from personality. I like working with people, helping them do their jobs better, and I am very happy to get out of their way when they don't need me.

## What do you consider your weaknesses to be?

I don't always exhibit my strengths. I can be too easily influenced by certain personalities. I have a pretty strong personality and compensating for that can be a challenge. Finding ways to adapt or communicate with the people that are put off or downright intimidated can, and will be, an issue. When I am really tired I lose my flexibility, I lose my patience, and that is a very good time for me to say, 'excuse me, it is time for me to take a break.'

## Since you started in 1977, what are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?

We're getting more thoughtful and better at true risk management. Instead of defaulting to suppression, we are finally asking, what is the best way of dealing with this fire? We're asking, what is really at risk and sometimes the answer is us. We are working towards the right response in the right ways, in the right times, for the right reasons. We're changing the dynamic from 'hero' firefighter and 'victim' homeowner into a partnership. We are trying to address culture and develop leadership, including situational leadership. That's when someone may not be the designated leader but at a given moment they have the information and the insight to make a leadership decision. We're less of a top down, 'do what I say' organization and more of a 'speak up' organization, particularly as it relates to safety, but we have a long ways to go. We're communicating better with internal and external audiences.

## What do you consider the worst changes you have seen in the wildland fire service?

We are still killing people, often not because of a big decision, but because of a series of small decisions. Poor decision-making cannot be corrected by policy alone. We need to work more on cultural shifts especially in risk management.

## Describe a few of the toughest decisions or dilemmas you have faced?

The tough decisions are when I'm a wreck. On an incident there is sleep deprivation, dehydration, poor food, and there is decision-making overload. Learning to recognize when my decision-making is

impaired is the first decision I've got to make and then either mitigate it or do a reality-check with somebody. A lot of small bad decisions can add up. Realizing that we are getting backed into a corner and stopping to examine what is going on is tough. Making a decision that is contrary to the culture - having the courage to say, 'that was then, but what is the value in this activity or ritual?' - is tough.

### **What handful of "lessons learned" would you offer to a young leader today?**

Truly take care of yourself physically, emotionally, intellectually. Exercise, eat well, or at least compensate for your indulgences. The number one safety tool for firefighters is their minds, and the best way to keep that tool sharp is to keep it hydrated and well rested. Somebody said, 'Character is doing the right thing when nobody is looking'. Learn to forgive yourself because we are not always the honorable people we want to be. Practicing forgiveness I think is crucial. 'Be the change you seek' (Mahatma Gandhi). Practicing what you want to become, I think is very important.

### **Do you think a legacy is important and if so, what do you want your legacy to be?**

I hope that my positive influences outweigh my negative ones. I've worked with a lot of really good people, and if I took some of their lessons and passed them on in a meaningful way that would be great. If I have been part of the group that is trying to make this change to true risk management, true fire management not just suppression, or 'whacking it,' then I am happy. More important than legacy is being able to look at myself in the mirror and say, 'I have done the best I could with what I had today.' That I am able to start the new day with yesterday behind me.

*Kyle Swanstrom interviewed Barb Stewart in December 2011.*