

Leaders

We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Interview with Edy Williams-Rhodes

by Louis Hurst

As the daughter of a forester who tagged along with her dad on workdays, Edy Williams-Rhodes had her first experience with forest fires, planting trees and what it meant to “work in the woods” at an early age. This early exposure assuredly influenced Edy, who followed in her father’s footsteps by pursuing a forest management degree and completing a rewarding thirty year career as a forester with the federal land management agencies.

Edy was born in 1954 to Dan and Elsie Williams in the small southern town of Magnolia, Mississippi. During her early years, the family moved several times throughout the southern portion of the state transferring with her father’s forestry position in private industry. The outdoors always brought enjoyment for Edy, and growing up in a rural environment gave her opportunities to ride horses, swim in the local creeks, roam the woods, and have many pets and critters. As a child, she aspired to become a veterinarian, but events led her down a different pathway.

In the early 1970s, when Edy graduated from high school and began college, non-traditional career choices for young women were fairly unusual. Attending Mississippi State University, she first followed the traditional route that seemed most acceptable at the time, which was to become a school teacher. However, a little exposure to student teaching and the challenge of keeping a room full of young children in their seats made it clear to Edy that this was not her cup of tea! Happily, “Plan B,” evolved through her contact and participation in the MSU Forestry Club, also with the advice of a helpful professor, Dr. Ross.

Although she wanted to immediately change her major and study to become a forester, this did not sound wise to Edy’s parents. They felt she needed a teaching degree to fall back on in case this unusual career choice did not work out. So Edy stayed the course, obtaining a degree in elementary education, and then began her forestry studies.

In 1976, she became a Cooperative Education Student with the U.S. Forest Service, where she alternated work and study semesters. This provided a wonderful opportunity to gain experience and to see what a career in federal service would bring. This was an adventure for Edy who moved away from her home state for the first time to live in Kentucky and work on the Daniel Boone National Forest. For a country girl who had never spent time in the mountains, experiencing fall colors and winter snow, it was quite the adventure. The work, the people, and that first experience working for the Forest Service were extraordinary for Edy.



Edy Williams-Rhodes
on a fire career:

**“It is a profession
to be proud of
and worth the
commitment of
one’s energies and
aspirations.”**

She began as a member of a field crew, participating in a variety of timber, wildlife, recreation and fire management projects. She was then given responsibility as Director for a 40 person, residential Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) Camp, where she supervised crew leaders, oversaw the work projects, and was responsible 24/7 for the safety and welfare of the YCC enrollees. This particular duty brought back memories of her student teaching days, as keeping track of 40 teenagers after hours was quite challenging.

Upon graduating from forestry school, Edy became a permanent employee of the Forest Service on the Daniel Boone. Here she continued work in timber management becoming a Compartment Prescriber and Certified Silviculturist, with collateral duties in fire management. In 1983, Edy moved from the Daniel Boone to the National Forests in Florida, continuing in timber and fire management. Edy's next position was as District Ranger of the Mena Ranger District on the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. Following Edy's work in Florida, she made a career move by focusing on fulltime fire management in the Forest Service's Southern Regional Office as Group Leader for Fire Planning and Analysis and later as Acting Regional Director for Cooperative Forestry.

In 1996, Edy moved to Washington D.C. to take the job of Branch Chief for Fire Planning. Soon after, she moved to the position of Cooperative Fire Protection Specialist and later assumed the position of Assistant Director of Fire and Aviation Management, Planning and Budget. During February of 2000, she became the first female Regional Fire Director for the Forest Service when she moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico and the Southwest Region. Several years later in June of 2003, after 27 years with the Forest Service, a wonderful opportunity presented itself, and Edy transferred to the National Park Service (NPS) to become the bureau's Chief for the Division of Fire and Aviation and Structural Fire Management at NPS national headquarters located in Washington D.C. After spending three incredible years in that position, Edy retired from federal service in June of 2006.

Starting in 1979 and continuing throughout her career, Edy has been active on Incident Management Teams. In 1988 she had her first assignment as a primary member of an Area Command Team, specializing in Logistics. She served with Area Command Teams since 1988 and in 2002 became the first female Area Commander for a National Interagency Area Command Team. Since that time, ACT#3 has served on numerous assignments for wildland fire, hurricanes, and in support of the USDA mobilization for control of the spread of Newcastle disease.

Additionally, Edy has served as a team member and a team leader on disaster preparedness training assignments with the International Forestry Disaster Assistance Program and with USAID. During these assignments, in conjunction with U.S. military partners, the teams developed and implemented simulations for natural disaster preparedness exercises for local emergency management agencies on several Caribbean islands.

On the afternoon of June 28, 2006, following her retirement after 30 years of federal service, I was fortunate enough to be able to have a conversation with Edy about leadership. To be able to interview someone who was such a trend setter and grew into her position through hard work and learning from others was a real honor.



Edy Williams-Rhodes' National Area Command Team #3 on assignment in southern Oregon and northern California during 2002 fire season.

What was your view of the wildland fire service when you first started and when you retired?

I started in the Southern Region, U.S. Forest Service, where fire management was somewhat different than it was in the western regions, so my answer is influenced by this. Where once there were very few full-time fire positions in the south, there are now many. In retrospect, when I started, fire was a team effort where everyone took responsibility and contributed to the effort. I believe that are many benefits to this collateral duty approach which contributed to employee development and a greater understanding of fire's benefits across program areas. The south is now a major player in terms of fuels

management, incident management, all hazard response and integration of fire with land and resource management activities.

Nationally, I have seen the fire management program grow tremendously and become much more complex and consistent across the country and among the interagency National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCWG) partners. Fire management has continued to become subject to greater public scrutiny, due to the complex issues related to it such as wildland urban interface, the increasing cost of fire suppression, and environmental issues and concerns for public lands management.

Also, because growing programs involve growing budgets, Congress and the various governmental oversight bodies are increasingly interested and involved in program implementation.

Lastly, as NIMS has been adopted nationally as the incident response system used at all levels of government, our fire qualified personnel are finding themselves involved in all hazard responses on a routine basis. This agency responsibility to support for the National Response Plan and national emergencies changes the game significantly due to the commitment of resources and personnel who would otherwise be responding to wildfire and doing agency mission-related work.

To answer your question very directly, Louis, wildland fire was a lot less structured and more fun when I first started, however, it was still the best job in the world when I retired!

Do you still follow the fire seasons?

Sure. I watch the National Situation Report and know what teams are out and what's happening with large fires across the country. I also pay close attention to tropical storm and hurricane events and predictions.

When did you come to the National Interagency Fire Center and how has it changed over the years?

On my first trip to Boise, the center was still called the Boise Interagency Fire Center (BIFC) and was used as a mobilization center for firefighting crews being assembled for western fire suppression duty. My first trip to BIFC was in 1977 on a Kentucky firefighting crew going through Boise for fire assignment. We were assigned to the Hog Fire in California, where I spent 3 adventurous weeks spiked in the back country, had the opportunity to see country I had only imagined and definitely was bitten by the 'fire-bug.'

BIFC is now NIFC and along with the evolution have come new facilities, sophisticated systems and a more

integrated approach to interagency coordination. The sphere of participation has been increased to include fulltime representation from the States and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the daily operations with the federal land management agencies. There is increased coordination with the Geographic Area Coordination Groups and Coordination Centers and a decentralization of many responsibilities to the field. The NIFC Fire Directors and their staff work together continuously to address the issues and concerns that affect all agencies on a national basis.

So have you actually worked at NIFC in Boise?

I never worked at NIFC, although I spent a lot of time there on special projects or in meetings. My official positions with national staff areas for both the Forest Service and most recently with the National Park Service (NPS) have been in Washington, DC. My official relationship with NIFC has been as the supervisor of the NPS Branch Chiefs there for Wildland and Structural Fire.

You talked about catching the "fire bug." What made you want to work with fire so much?

My experiences were always so exciting to me..... For instance, on the Hog Fire, I had never had the opportunity to go out west. I had never seen the mountains of California, or spiked in the back country that way and so it was just a huge adventure for me. Traveling with a fire crew, the camaraderie, and the sense of danger at times was just exhilarating. Of course, the work was extremely hard and tiring like nothing I had ever known.

To add to the drama, at the end of the assignment, our fire crew had to demob out of spike camp ahead of a weather event. However, one crew member was down with probable pneumonia and was scheduled to be evacuated by helicopter. I was chosen to stay with the person and accompany him to the hospital. However, the storm hit and we were snowed in with the spike camp crew for 2 more days before a helicopter could make it in. We flew out through a short break in the weather and arrived safely at the hospital with the crewmember getting the medical care needed.

And so I caught the 'firebug,' the excitement, the different experiences, the opportunity to see and travel and be places that I had never been before just thrilled me and still does as I relive my memories!

Can you talk about your more supervisory roles?

As far as supervising, I started early with the YCC Camp Director experience that I mentioned earlier. Then for each position I held, I supervised a combination of other

individuals or work crews throughout my career. Philosophically, supervision can be seen as a mechanical, process thing, but to me is more of a relationship thing. You should strive to clearly define expectations and what needs to be accomplished, and then try like heck to allow the people you supervise to get the job done without a lot of interference. Too much oversight or direction squelches innovation and initiative.

Who were the most important individuals that had a significant influence on your life?

Family has always been real important to me and probably had more influence on me than anything else. Probably of most influence was my father, whose approach to life has been an inspiration and role model for me. My mother has been chronically ill and very limited in her activities, since my sisters and I were very young. My maternal grandmother stepped in and we spent many delightful summers with her as we were growing up. She became my 'hero' as well. So, my answer is that my family has been my greatest influence, followed by a few very good, lifelong friends along the way."

Who were your fire management role models? Why?

It is difficult to mention individuals by name because I know I will leave many important people out. There were many patient and generous people along the way that helped me learn things, and who supported me through the many mistakes I made.

As far as individuals, Steve Pedigo, who is now retired, was the Fire Management Officer on the Daniel Boone National Forest when I was hired. Steve is a very effective leader and forward thinking individual. He saw several areas of opportunity in the south, including promotion of incident management teams, increased fuels management activities and general workforce development needs. Steve recruited me for the Daniel Boone incident management team. Involvement with incident management teams stayed with me and became the most rewarding part of my career. I fully believe participation on incident management teams is a much overlooked way for accelerated employee development due to the emergency nature under which individuals learn to size up situations, make decisions, implement plans and become team players.

Later in my career, Mike Edrington, now retired Forest Service Fire Director and Agency Administrator in the Pacific Northwest, encouraged me to get outside of my comfort zone and take on responsibilities in fire management that I might not have otherwise. Mike has mentored and encouraged countless individuals and continues to be a role model highly respected in the wildland fire and emergency services community.

Last but certainly not least, Rick Gale, former head of the National Park Service Fire and Aviation Management programs has opened many doors for me over the years. I have had the awesome responsibility of following in Rick's footsteps in a couple of situations. First as Chair of the Advanced Incident Management and Area Command Steering Committee, which leads the national S-520/620 course, and then as the successor to him in his leadership role in the NPS. Rick, like Mike Edrington, has always taken time to recruit and mentor folks for fire management. There are many of us who owe a big thanks to him for his confidence in our abilities.

In addition to the above, there is a long list including folks many of you know, such as Rex Mann, Pat Kelly, Bobby Kitchens, etc, etc, etc.

What makes you want to follow a leader?

I start by respecting the position, i.e. I believe in 'Riding for the Brand.' Then practically speaking, effective communication must come first. I need to understand what needs to be accomplished. If the leader has a plan which makes sense and they are approaching it with a confident air in a way that I can understand, it is easy to get on board.

What would make someone want to follow you as a leader?

I think those same qualities, an ability to communicate a purpose, a vision, goals and objectives. Also, I believe in participatory leadership, where asking for input and suggestions and letting people come up with the solutions to problems is routine. I believe this leads to a team approach and creates buy-in from those involved.

Do you think leaders are born or made?

Yes...and yes. I think that all individuals can become better leaders through practice, introspection, training, and development of skills typically found in good leaders. Many of these skills, including public speaking, decision-making, and confident interaction with groups and individuals, come more naturally to some people than others. Some people are extroverts by nature and enjoy being in highly interactive positions, which may make it more comfortable for them in certain leadership scenarios. Introverts, on the other hand, also make exceptional leaders and certainly many leaders we know have been introverts, but I believe that it takes more effort on their part to be comfortable in some of the same situations where extroverts thrive.

Do you feel like you were a naturally born leader or did you have to push toward becoming a leader that way?

I had to push myself. I can remember when I first started with the Forest Service, how I dreaded public speaking. For instance, every month one of us on staff would be in charge of developing the safety program for our family meetings. I worried about this requirement for days in advance. To get over the dread of public speaking, I joined Toastmasters and did several things to help me be more comfortable with it.

Can you go over your strengths as a person and a leader that has helped you with your career?

My Servant Leader attitude....I care a lot about what I do, the people I work with and the quality of the job we do. I believe in teamwork, positive attitudes and proactive problem solving, I am hard-working, logical, and tenacious. I recognize the expertise of others and my own limitations, and invite participation and sharing of leadership.

Can you go over your weaknesses in your professional career? And how you tried to work on those?

I have never enjoyed being in the spotlight and have had to work at increasing my comfort level for being in charge or for being spokesperson for a group. I used to avoid taking on different roles that I was encouraged to do, as I preferred staying in background roles in support of others. As I gained experience and had some successes, my comfort level increased and I did take on increasingly challenging roles.

Since you started in 1976, what are some of the biggest improvements you have seen in the wildland fire service?

There is a better understanding today of the complexity involved in a total fire management program and the value of our interagency partnerships. Emphasis on fuels management, wildland fire use, fire science and ecology require specialization and advanced knowledge and skills. Community assistance programs and fire planning have increased partnerships and interaction with local communities. Lastly, I believe the advances that we have made in the implementation of NIIMS/NIMS and ICS are phenomenal. Our Incident Management and Area Command Teams are unmatched in the nation, and are now critical for meeting our agencies' responsibilities in the National Response Plan for all hazard response.

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

I believe in the 'keep things simple stupid,' or K.I.S.S. philosophy. I am afraid that we have lost sight of this philosophy in the development of many of the procedures and approaches we have developed to address today's program complexities.

When the Forest Service first started, all rangers had one small book that contained all the manual guidance that they needed. The book fit in their pocket or saddle bags and they kept it with them as they rode and patrolled their territory. They were able to use this minimal guidance and their best judgment to make decisions as situations arose. Compare that small book to the shelves of manuals and directives we have today. We have become rule-based agencies, all with the best intentions of preventing accidents or providing adequate guidance for every situation that might occur. However, the problem with a rule-based management system is that it does not encourage individuals to think independently, act decisively, and take responsibility for their actions. They hesitate to provide leadership because they feel so confined to a rule-based system.

If you could simplify things a little bit how would you do that?

I believe that the current effort for development of doctrine is very positive. Doctrine development is designed to reduce the rule-based system to more of a holistic approach, guided by overall principles, where people can use their best judgment, knowledge, skills and abilities to make good decisions.

Can you describe a few of the toughest decisions and dilemmas you have faced? What helped guide you through some of those decisions?

On decisions that affect you personally, like career decisions, you must listen to your inner voice and do what feels right to you. Ask for the advice of others and consider it, but be true to yourself. When making decisions as a leader of a unit and a group of people, you must keep the big picture in mind and do what is best for the organization as a whole, for the long run, as opposed to what may be popular or non-controversial.

Why was your career path such a tough decision?

Sometimes, other people's ideas about what will be success for you, is different than what you have in mind for yourself. This can cause conflicts and be problematic if your personal ideas are very different from the agency's. I was initially encouraged to pursue a career in

line officer positions, but knew early on that I wanted to pursue a staff position in fire management. It took awhile to resolve this difference of opinion and find a win/win situation for the agency and myself.

My advice to others would be that it is important to determine what you would like to do and then begin to obtain the knowledge, skills and abilities to do it. Try a lot of different things and find out what you are good at, what you enjoy, and what makes you want to get up in the morning. Then pursue the training and responsibilities that will help you be competent and competitive in the steps of your career ladder of choice.

Do you have a handful of lessons learned that you could offer a young person for work?

My advice to a young person is to not limit themselves. Take on challenges, accept responsibility and recognize opportunities. Break down fears or barriers that keep them from increasing their comfort level and reaching their potential. Always look for things that make them excited and enthusiastic about going to work and carve out their career paths in those general directions. Take advantage of the opportunity to learn from individuals who have been in place or with the agency for a long time....They are a wealth of information and have invaluable insight. Gaining their respect is usually a very high compliment.

For personal lessons learned do you have anything you would suggest to young people today?

Don't let your career overshadow your private life. Take care of your relationships. Also, take care of your body now, to reap the benefits when you are older. Good health is easy to take for granted when you are young, and your body is so forgiving. Developing good exercise and health habits when you are young will pay off big time as you get older and are ready to enjoy a quality retirement.

What ideas or projects are you currently working on?

I am working on my "Places to See and Things to Do Before I Die" list, which includes a lot of traveling for fun every chance I get, and enjoying country living in between trips. Professionally, I am pursuing my interests in real estate, as well as providing consultant/contractor services on a project by project basis in support of incident management, leadership training and writer editor services.

Have you read any good books recently or anytime that you would recommend to someone else?

There is a book that we used for an organizational effectiveness project last year that spoke to me. It's called The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, by Patrick Lencioni. Even though the title sounds negative, it is one of the best books that I have ever read on team building. It shows the basic foundational pieces that are essential for an effective team and provides very practical tools for assessing a team to determine what steps are needed to improve a team's performance.

Can you think of two or three major issues facing the wildland fire service today?

Workforce development and the replacing of diminishing expertise is a huge issue to me. Our budgets have prohibited us from being in a proactive hiring mode, and we are losing expertise faster than we are hiring new employees. We need to be making sure we have effective training programs to help new and current employees gain critical skills as quickly as possible.

I think that climate change concerns are huge in terms of effect on our fire management programs. We are no longer looking at large fires being 10,000 acres, but are becoming accustomed to 100,000 acre and half million acre mega-fires. All indications with climatologists are that the weather and the climate will continue to get hotter and drier over the next few decades, along with the inevitable increase in hazardous fuels.

What are your most memorable fires?

In addition to my earliest fires, such as the Hog Fire, the following stand out in my memory:

- Greater Yellowstone Unified Area Command – 1988, where I started out as a Resource Unit Leader on the Hell Roaring, but was drafted by Rick Gale into the Area Command Logistics Coordinator position in West Yellowstone;
- Dude Fire – 1990, Area Command Logistics Coordinator;
- Florida Wildfires of 1998, Area Command Logistics Coordinator;
- Cerro Grande – 2000, Regional Fire Director, Southwest Region US Forest Service;
- Hurricane Katrina and Rita – 2005, Area Commander National ACT #3.

Why were these fires so memorable to you?

The magnitude of each situation was phenomenal, and for very different reasons. Let's take a look at this

because it shows just how big the role of wildland firefighters has been and is:

Yellowstone was a landmark scenario where the lodge pole pine forest was going through a 300 year replacement fire scenario. This was a watershed event for the NPS, affecting fire policy and breaking all records for the magnitude of the response. Eventually, over 1.5 million acres burned. The challenges faced were multi-state, multi-fire, and multi-jurisdictional. And to top it off, 1988 was an election year which magnified the complexity of the political/media and public information situation.

The Dude, of course, was a tragedy fire with 6 fatalities, which one never forgets.

The Florida Wildfires of 1998 involved unprecedented state and private lands and resulted in evacuations of entire counties on Florida's highly populated East coast.

The Cerro Grande was a worst case scenario, escaped prescribed fire with loss of 235 homes in the town of Los Alamos. Also, there was damage and threat to the historical Los Alamos National Laboratory, which, of course, was the top-secret location during WWII where the atomic bomb was developed.

And finally, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which is still an ongoing and monumental situation, where 100,000's of citizens were displaced by hurricane landfall in the Gulf Coast region from Texas to Alabama. Katrina has been called the greatest natural disaster of all time for the USA resulting in loss of 1,834 lives and over an estimated \$1.8 billion dollars in property damage.

How has the role of females in the fire program expanded over the years?

Quite a bit in my opinion. I don't know of any job in fire that doesn't have some very capable females who are currently practicing. When you think back thirty years ago when I started, we were the 'one and only' or 'few and far between,' so I see a tremendous amount of progress since then. I think there are many women currently in the system who will be the leaders for tomorrow.

As a trend setter in this field, did you ever feel stereotyped by this traditionally male field?

Stereotyping may have been there, but I never spent much time thinking or worrying about it. I just tried to always do the best job I could, contribute where possible and my co-workers usually grew to value me. I will never forget what my first boss told me during my orientation. He said, "I expect a day's work for a day's pay." I took

that expectation to heart and have followed that philosophy ever since.

As far as being in a traditionally male dominated field, I remember the early days when I would look around the room and I would be the only women in a meeting. Maybe it should have felt uncomfortable or different, but it usually didn't. I would look around the table at all the people who were usually my friends and coworkers, and it felt natural to be there. It never occurred to me that I was the only female there; I was just part of a team.

Do you have any favorite quotes, or words to live by?

- Quick formula for effective situational awareness, risk management and leadership: See it, Say it. Fix it!
- Managers are people that do things right; Leaders are people that do the right thing - Warren Bennis
- It is not fair to ask of others what you are not willing to do yourself - Eleanor Roosevelt
- 20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor; Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. - Mark Twain

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

When you get to the end of a career and begin the retirement process, you do think about what you have accomplished that has been worthwhile. I suppose the thing I would suggest as my legacy is that I hope that I have made it easier for other women, minorities and any young employees looking to the future to see themselves in non-traditional roles and leadership positions within our agencies and fire management. Individuals really can do whatever they set their minds to and it is easy to underestimate one's own potential. I hope I will inspire future leaders to continue in this important work we do in wildland fire management. It is a profession to be proud of and worth the commitment of one's energies and aspirations.

This interview with Edy Williams-Rhodes was conducted by Louis Hurst, by telephone, on June 28, 2006.