

Leaders

We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Interview with Jim Durrwachter

by Jennifer Hinckley

Jim Durrwachter has never been a man to beat around the bush, nor has he struggled to mince words. Jim was born in Oklahoma and spent his childhood in Oklahoma, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana, and then found himself stuck in Texas, the armpit of the World as he says when he was 13. He pursued a Degree in Forestry at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

His first job upon graduation from SFASU was for the Florida Division of Forestry as a tractor-plow operator in 1976. Two and a half years later he started with the US Forest Service on Sam Houston National Forest as a temporary timber marker. In 1979 he became permanently-employed as a timber marker on Sabine National Forest, Hemp Hill, Texas. After only one year, he became the Junior Forester in Clarksville, Arkansas on the Ozark National Forest. Five years later he was a Forester in Wiggins, Mississippi on the De Soto National Forest, Black Creek District. During his time on the De Soto, he detailed to the Redding Hotshots for six months.

Jim became the Silviculturist on the Biloxi District of the De Soto National Forest in 1987. He then mustered the "big jump" to the unknown of the US Fish and Wildlife Service by taking the District (Zone) Fire Management Officer position stationed at Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge in 1990. He provided fire management to Florida Panther, Ding Darling, Key Deer and Puerto Rican National Wildlife Refuges until 2007 when he became the Director of the Prescribed Fire Training Center in Tallahassee, Florida. Jim Durrwachter retired January 2, 2010.



Jim Durrwachter in 1995.



Jim Durrwachter

“First, listen and advise but never offer a solution. Secondly, lead by example. Lastly, be compassionate - yet firm - and honest.”

What makes you want to follow someone?

Respect that the individual has accumulated, their performance in that field, their knowledge in that field, openness to discussion, their ability to teach without being overbearing, listening skills, mentoring.

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

It all starts with your parents; they set the foundation to grow from. They encourage you as a young child - to know what is right and what is wrong. They set curfews. Why? Responsibility! It also allows children to build confidence. Parents encourage you to try your very best at everything you do. They take pride with you in your accomplishments. They also instilled respect in you, your family and friends; without respect you are not going far. As a leader, you have to set your folks up for success not failure.

If you were to pick the three most important character traits for an effective leader, what would those be?

First, listen and advise but never offer a solution. Secondly, lead by example. Lastly, be compassionate - yet firm - and honest.

Are leaders born or made? Explain.

Made. I will follow a leader that has made mistakes and corrected those mistakes into positive actions. As they go through their career, they build their skills based on experiences, learn something new each day, think outside the box, are proactive not reactive.

Regarding leadership, what quote comes to mind?

US Marine Corp's "Adapt and overcome."

Who are some of the individuals that had a significant influence on your life?

1) My parents. They both were tough when they needed to be and compassionate when it was deserved. They never tried to get me to do what they wanted. 2) Rex Mann. He showed me that before you answer a question or perform something, think about it before you react. Slow down and take your time; the outcome will be much better than rushing in.

Thinking back to your youth, what other influences helped you become a leader?

1) Faith. God gave me an ability to use to the best of my ability; it was up to me to use that ability. 2) Faith that I received from my family to make a decision, whether it was right or wrong. They had given me the latitude to make that decision and they were supportive of it. Growing up our parents challenged us all. They said set a goal and when you reach it great but don't stop there, establish another one. 3) My personal family. Without their support, I would not have been able to accomplish what I have today.

What do you consider to be your strengths?

Actively listen to my folks, learn something new each day, have ground-based experiences, follow the saying that "every day is a new day," and never stopped learning: reading, taking a class, discussion with fellow workers.

What do you consider to be your weaknesses?

I allowed the "job" to dictate my life. I spent a lot of time away from my family.

Since you started in 1975, what are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?

We are now beginning to practice what we preach!, by utilizing natural barriers to burn out. In my career, it was taught that we do this tactic, but it is not widely used. We typically get up close and personal with a fire and usually cause more damage than the fire. The use of prescribed fire helps to sharpen those wildfire skills in that it forces you to look at the big picture. The big picture includes seeing what might happen ecologically, socially, with personnel, and equipment. So, we now plan burn outs like prescribed fire.

When I go to large fires, I am looking at it like a big prescribed burn. Where are my opportunities to burn out from, what are the weather patterns, can I get with the locals to get this information, utilize the right people for the right job. My career has allowed me to drop a few matches, and by doing so, I have become a better fire manager. I hope that they idea of using natural barriers will continue to become more used than talked about.

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

Pushing folks into leadership positions before they are ready, climbing the ladder and missing a few rungs along the way, meeting personnel quotas: "we need to have "X" number of persons in this position." I believe the position should be held by those individuals, who are qualified, forget the numbers. The militia has all but vanished. Early on in my career, everyone was part of the militia; maintenance workers, recreation staff, secretaries and the like. Now it is hard to get those folks involved in anything outside of their daily job description.

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

First, I took a 6-month detail out west away from my young family. During the detail, we worked in Alaska where a phone was hard to find. After a few weeks, I called home and spoke to my young son who said, "Dad, I thought you had died." That was hard.

Secondly, at Florida Panther Refuge, in January 2002, the day after we burned along I-75, there was a speed/fog/smoke incident. Three people were killed in collisions just south of the refuge and approximately a mile from the burn unit. Dealing with the immediate stress and long-term effects of the incident was something else.

What helped to guide you through those situations?

Family! They all had a voice in the decisions. We sat down and discussed each opportunity and they supported the final decision. They need to have a say in what goes on with the entire family. Their vote counts. Without their support, I could not have done what I have performed.

When did you realize that you had a significant influence on others?

When you look at the individuals that have come through your program - the square pegs - and you see that now they have a program of their own: Refuge/Regional Office/District/National Office. That is gratification. You had a hand in their career; that is rewarding. When your "kids" have flown the

coop and are making a name for themselves; from time to time they call and just check in.

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

When you go to the field, ask questions; learn from the "old hands"; participate in every aspect of the job; watch and listen to what is going on during the burn or wildfire; listen and understand how they came to the conclusion and why; be proactive and not reactive; plan ahead; play the "What-If Game;" "step up to the plate" and take a swing!

What is a book you have read recently that you would recommend to others?

The Bible. I am not pushing any religion on anyone but when I read the Bible I see strong "Leaders Intent" strewn through every page.

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

First thing is what does legacy mean? "Anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor." It is real hard for me to sit here and pat myself on the back for what others have done. At one of my retirement parties, several of my former employees had this to say about me...

"He was compassionate and firm, honest." "He did not beat around the bush." "He led by example." "He never asked an employee to do something he had never done." "He treated his employees with respect and allowed them to make decisions on their own - right or wrong." "He never allowed his folks to make a decision that resulted in failure." "He encouraged them to take a chance - step a little further out on the limb, to follow their dreams." "He took pride in his work." "He never said "I" it was always "WE" when it came for recognition." "He was dedicated to his folks." "He always had their backs." "He pushed his folks to best of their ability." "His door was always open." "He admitted when he was wrong." "He was a family man, and we were part of that family. He treated us like one of his own."

This interview with Jim Durrwachter was conducted by Jennifer Hinckley in October 2010.