Just Right Here

By Ana Maria Spagna '89

CREATIVE COMMONS PHOTO BY KJELL OLSEN

A small crowd of volunteers assembles outside a cabin, pushing wheelbarrows, carrying rakes and loppers, chainsaws and gas. We do this every Monday night, at a different neighbor's home, but with an early-season wildfire burning, this week it's more urgent. Helicopters thwap overhead. Smoke obscures the horizon.

When I was a kid in Southern California, each October the sky turned orange, and on TV, red garlands of flames snaked down brown suede hills. Bazillion-dollar homes in Malibu tottered uncertainly, silhouetted against roiling flames, then fell and slid toward the sea. For a kid like me, cross-legged on the shag rug, there should've been terror in it, except that it was as predictable as the World Series or Wimbledon. With a shrug, I thought: Gawd, how dumb! Those people should move away! Today, in the Cascades, the sky turned dirty yellow as overcooked squash. It happens every year. Most people know the story: a hundred years of fire suppression created lousy forest conditions—trees crowded too tight, disease and pest-plagued—and global warming added climatic conditions. Just right here, in the past decade, wildfires in the surrounding wilderness burned 5,000 acres, then 50,000. The sheriff delivers evacuation notices that stack up like junk mail announcing the obvious: Move away! I'm running a chainsaw instead.

Like most of my neighbors in this tiny mountain town, I built my own home. I built it here because I love this place, blindly, indiscriminately, probably foolishly. I love it because the mountains rise steep and craggy, and the forest holds silence like a blessing, and the river runs fast and blue. The house took my entire life savings, a heavy debt, and a year to build. My hair turned gray overnight. I thought: I never want to do that again as long as I live. I also thought: I will never leave.

That was years ago, before the fires started to grow so large, before talk-radio hosts and newspaper editorialists joined the chorus: move away, move away! Now even the firefighters who hold daily briefings can barely restrain their exasperation. We would not have to bother, they think, if it weren't for you.

True enough. We live in what's called the wildland-urban interface. (The acronym, WUI—WOO-eee!—makes the discussion sound a lot more fun than it is.) Population estimates for the WUI vary from 34 million in the lower forty-eight to 140 million. What doesn't change is the forecast of doom: the number is growing fast. If not for us, government agencies could manage forest fires differently, allow them to burn unhindered more often and do the work that fire should do. That's a problem, I agree, one with plenty of large-scale solutions worth debating.

Meanwhile, for me and my neighbors, the problem is simpler. This is where we live. What can we do about it?

In June, we sent out letters to every property owner offering to do some work, any work, to help protect their place. We tacked a sign-up sheet in the post office, and right away, names appeared in ballpoint scrawl. We showed up with tools, removed dead vegetation, thinned live vegetation, pruned tree limbs, did anything we could to prevent a rogue ember from burning down a house.

We bragged to a visiting state forester.

"We're creating a whole lot of defensible space."

"That's no way to think of it," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"When the Big One comes, there might not be anybody around to defend these cabins. Not safely. You gotta think in terms of survivable space."

It was a sobering, if inarguable, point.

Back at the cabin, nightfall approaches. A cool breeze blows, and the river runs gray with glacial melt. A six-year-old tugs on her mother's leg to point out wild rose petals floating pink in an eddy. We're chatting as we work, about music and gardening, anything, anything but fire. There's laughter and camaraderie, and I'd like to say that it's all Amish barn-raising and square-dance fun. Mostly it's just work, and for most of us it's work after work.

But it's making a difference.

A woman in her sixties stands poised to throw a long limb onto a burn pile. I race forward to help, and she yanks back.

"I used to play semipro softball. Contrary to what people think, I can throw."

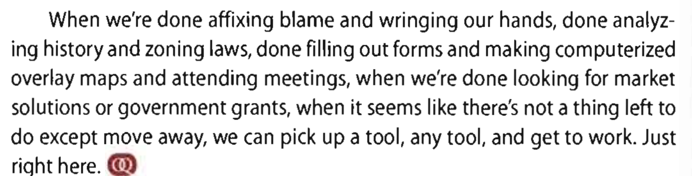
I step back and watch her hurl the heavy branch high.

"Don't underestimate me," she says.

I smile.

"I never will again," I say.

I'm hoping that might apply to all of us, those of us here tonight, those of us in the tiny mountain town, and the millions of us staked out in the WUI, disparaged and discouraged. We can do more than you think. More, even, than we think.



When we're done affixing blame and wringing our hands, done analyzing history and zoning laws, done filling out forms and making computerized overlay maps and attending meetings, when we're done looking for market solutions or government grants, when it seems like there's not a thing left to do except move away, we can pick up a tool, any tool, and get to work. Just right here.

Ana Maria Spagna lives in Stehekin, Washington. She is the author of Now Go Home, *a collection of essays, and winner of the 2002* Oregon Quarterly *Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest.*