

Lisa Lieberman



A Bundled Selection of
Articles by Lisa Lieberman for
Tulare County Magazine

TULARE COUNTY

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Tulare County's Sherri Bennett does her part to help the nation recover from disaster

To the (financial) rescue

Sherri Bennett, a financial expert on a national fire incidents management team, is pictured at a friend's home north of Visalia.

STEVE R. FUJIMOTO

BY LISA LIEBERMAN

For a young girl who grew up on a Tulare County cattle ranch outside of Porterville, but who always claimed she wasn't much of a "cowgirl," Sherri Bennett is one woman who grew up to do a lot of heroic things in her life, including responding to Americans in need during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the World Trade Center terrorist attacks nine years ago.

"I come from a fifth-generation ranch family, but I always had this fear of cows and horses," Bennett says. "As I grew up, I knew I wasn't the rough, tough cowgirl type, so I realized I was going to have to branch out."

Bennett joined the U.S. Forest Service a few years after high school and ended up as a financial chief on national and regional fire incident management teams. Throughout her 27-year career, she traveled the country responding to all types of high-risk incidents.

Although she worked in finance, she spent a fair amount of time hopping on airplanes at a moment's notice and rushing off to help deal with the nation's latest disasters. She was part of a team that set up camp at the Pentagon after Sept.

11 and provided relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In her career, she's been to more than 75 disasters, including fires, floods and terrorist attacks.

When people think of aid flowing to natural and political disasters, most people may not think of the things people like Sherri Bennett and her teammates did. But the simple fact is that among all the commotion of firefighters and relief workers trying to do their jobs, someone has to keep track of the details, set up the infrastructures, pay the bills, order the supplies, keep track of time records, make sure everyone gets fed and has a place to go to sleep at night.

'Humbling experience'

One of the highlights of Bennett's career was when she found herself in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, one of the first people to begin trying to orchestrate relief efforts.

"It was a really humbling experience. We got there and there was no power, no air conditioning. We just set up camp and sweated all night long in the heat and humidity. We also didn't have any other food except for MREs [meals ready-to-eat], which we ate for seven days," Bennett says.

Many of Bennett's days began when she rolled out of her tent hours before sunrise and didn't end until very late at night. She often lived and worked alongside firefighters and emergency workers, trying to untangle the complicated financial aspects of the operations.

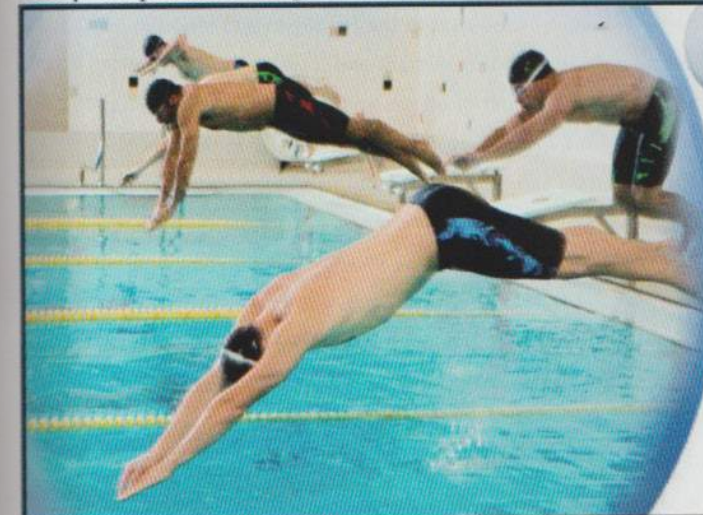
"I loved the team dynamics," Bennett says. "I loved working together with people to try to solve problems. And it was really rewarding when I would go out on these kinds of assignments and actually get to see something from beginning to end and feel like I was making a difference."

▶ Continued on page 15



Sherri Bennett, on duty during a deployment following Hurricane Katrina.

COURTESY OF SHERRI BENNETT



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And even though she was one of the few women in a male-dominated field, Bennett says that she never had any problems relating to men.

"I was raised around men all my life, so I didn't have a problem relating to them in the field. I'm not saying it was always easy. Sometimes I had to step it up a notch to prove my worth, but I didn't have many problems," Bennett says.

Full circle

On top of all the work of dealing with the logistics of emergency crews and spending so many nights away from home, Bennett also had to deal with the challenges of raising two young children as a single mother.

"It was difficult raising two young kids by myself, and I had to work really hard to find ways to financially support us. Luckily, I also had the help of my mom and grandmother," Bennett says.

Now, at the age of 57, Bennett is officially retired from the Forest Service. She still works part time for the Kern County Fire Department and the Ventura County Fire Department, continuing to work on emergency incidents all around the country.

When she's not, she's back at home on the ranch in Porterville with her parents helping out with gathering, branding and marketing the cattle.

"I have much more appreciation for the ranch than I did when I was a teenager. It's a great feeling knowing I've come full circle," Bennett says. ■



Above: Sherri Bennett attends a command and general staff meeting while on duty in Canada.

Left: Sherri Bennett, left, is pictured with teammates Ross Peckinpah, the team logistics chief, and Loni Dunnagan-Holt, also a close friend, during a deployment to Canada.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHERRI BENNETT

JOURNAL CONCLUSION

I'm proud to be an American and given the opportunity to support the Urban Search and Rescue Teams as they performed their duties in cleaning up the aftermath of this national disaster. I am proud to be a member of this National California Interagency Incident Management Team No. 3 where being a team means all of us working closely together and supporting each other all the way. We're like a family and each incident brings us closer together. Most of all I'm glad to be back home with my family who are the most special and important part of my life. I called often and made sure all my "I love you's" were up to date because you just never know what the future holds for any of us. GOD BLESS AMERICA and may we all learn something from this tragedy and just how fragile life and freedom can be if we don't do our part to support America, take care of ourselves and protect our freedom.

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CELEBRATING WOMEN IN THE HEART OF THE VALLEY

MARCH 2010

TULARE COUNTY

**Cattlegirls
work to bring
ranch life to
the classroom**

Page 17

**Plus a great recipe for
slowly deviled beef**

SISTER ACTS

Wisdom,
whimsy — it's
the life of sisters

Page 8



sisters



"Our roots say we're sisters, our hearts say we're friends."
— Author Unknown

Only sisters know what it's like to have and be a sister: Sometimes it's wonderful and sometimes you'd prefer a visit to the dentist.

We looked for **interesting sets of sisters in Tulare County** and **their stories appear on these pages**. But what we learned is that **all sisters have great stories** — if you just let them tell you...

'My Sister's Closet'

The best thing about growing up with four sisters: You always have a friend. The next best thing: You always have something to wear. This works out especially well when you all wear the same size shoe.

Cindy Skeen, who opened My Sister's Closet in Three Rivers four years ago, and her sisters Sandy, Stacy and Jill, are all conveniently within a half size of each other, which means they can literally walk in each other's shoes: They trade boots, dressy heels, flip flops — anything that catches their eye when they're digging through each others' closets.

The sisters pretty much grew up swapping — and in some cases,

stealing — each others' clothes. "Sometimes we would borrow each others' clothes and forget what was whose," said Stacy Quintel, the third sister. "Even today, when we're having a family gathering, you can always find them in [the bedroom], digging through each others' clothes," said Diann Nehring, the girls' mother.

The three sisters — Cindy, 48, Stacy, 42 and Jill, 38 — who live in Three Rivers now, all have different tastes. Cindy is a casual, jeans-and-sweater kind of person; Jill loves vintage clothes; and, Stacy is more conservative. Although Cindy runs the store, which sells gently used and new clothing, her sisters help out with frequent contributions. This means that the store is always stocked with ▶

LISA LIEBERMAN

Sisters Stacy Quintel, Cindy Skeen, and Jill Griffith are the sisters behind My Sister's Closet in Three Rivers. Skeen owns the shop at 41661 Sierra Drive.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LISA LIEBERMAN

"You know they're always in your corner no matter what."



► an eclectic mix of clothes.

"My vision was to have items that are one of a kind or hard to find. But I also wanted things that are classic and stay in style," Cindy said.

Jill credits Cindy, who also works as a personal shopper and who got a lot of practice dressing up her three younger sisters when they were kids, with having

an especially good eye for color and knowing what types of clothes will look good on someone.

"Usually, when someone comes in the store and they show me one or two things, I know what's going to work for them," Cindy said.

More important to them than swapping clothes and trading shoes:

They're all each other's best friends. They babysit for each other. They call each other on the phone when they're upset. They've been through marriages and divorces together.

"We're incredibly close. You know they're always in your corner no matter what, and you can tell each other anything," Cindy said.

CELEBRATING LIFE IN THE HEART OF THE VALLEY

JULY 2009

TULARE COUNTY

A VOICE FOR CHILDREN

Marilyn Barr heads CASA

A LOOK AT **GOOD CAUSES**
AND THE **PEOPLE** WHO TAKE THEM UP

SOME ADVICE FROM THOSE WHO'VE FOLLOWED THEIR HEART

BY LISA LIEBERMAN

Aaron Gomes, founder of Sound N Vision in Visalia, didn't set out to start up a nonprofit. He was simply following his passion and trying to make his community a better place by bringing artists and musicians to Visalia from all over the world.

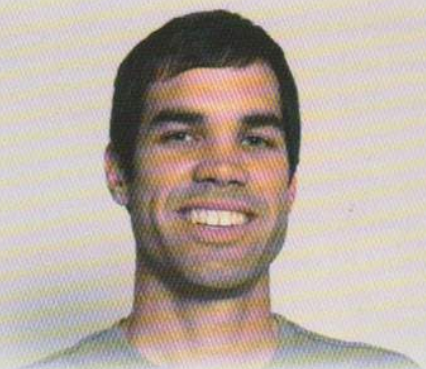
"My goal was to enrich Visalia with a variety of cultural experiences and make concert tickets affordable," Gomes said.

So, while other concert promoters were charging \$20-plus a ticket for big-name bands, Gomes was laying out his own money to book similar concerts and charging \$5 a ticket.

"My wife and I are both teachers with kids, and when we'd book these concerts, I'd be up in the middle of the night chewing my fingernails, hoping we'd break even," Gomes said.

Gomes did this for four years and a lot of the times the numbers didn't pan out. The whole community benefited from his efforts, though — the people who attended these events as well as the hotels, restaurants and local businesses that catered to concert attendees.

One day, about a year ago, a friend of Gomes pointed out the obvious: "Look," his friend said, "You're doing a service for the community. Everyone's making money except you. What you're doing is nonprofit work, so why don't you become a nonprofit?"



"My goal was to enrich Visalia with a variety of cultural experiences and make concert tickets affordable."

— AARON GOMES

Cathy Caples

Many times, starting a nonprofit from scratch isn't always the best way for people to help their communities, said Cathy Caples, executive director of Fresno-based Hands on Central California. It services Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera and Merced counties by connecting people who want to volunteer their time with local service organizations who need volunteers.

"My advice for people wanting to start nonprofits is to see how they might partner with organizations that are already doing something similar to what they want to do. I think that nonprofits that build up partnerships and collaborations with each other and with the community have a better chance of building up funding and getting resources," Caples said.

Caples, who's been a lifelong volunteer herself and started out volunteering as a teenager helping to put on the first Special Olympics in Glendale, is a perfect example of collaborating with other organizations.

Recently, Caples was able to secure 25 full-time government-subsidized volunteers from AmeriCorps to help out with her organization.

"When the Office on Service and Volunteerism asked volunteer groups in California how many AmeriCorps workers they could use, I said 50. We got 25."

Later on, Caples found out that there were only 70 workers available for the whole state.

"I was amazed that we got so many people for such a relatively small part of the state." ■



"My advice for people wanting to start nonprofits is to see how they might partner with organizations that are already doing something similar to what they want to do. I think that nonprofits that build up partnerships and collaborations with each other and with the community have a better chance of building up funding and getting resources."

— CATHY CAPLES

GOOD PARTS, BAD PARTS

■ Becoming a nonprofit isn't as easy as it sounds. Most people who apply for nonprofit status get turned down.

"We had to prove our worth to the IRS by showing them that we had already been in the trenches for four years providing a service to the community," said **Aaron Gomes**, founder of Sound N Vision. "We also got letters of support from the city and influential members of the community to back up what we were saying."

Being a nonprofit has its definite advantages, though, because it makes it easier for local businesses to lend support.

"Before we were getting \$50 donations here and there from concertgoers who wanted to support us. Now, we get donations running in the triple digits from businesses because we're a legitimate nonprofit and people can write off their donations," Gomes said.

The disadvantage of running a nonprofit, though, is that in some ways, it's even tougher than a regular business.

"We still have the economic insecurity because we're laying out money upfront and we don't always know what the budget is going to be. As a nonprofit, you also have to be an open book so anyone, including the IRS, can check your records — much more so than any other regular business," Gomes said.

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OCTOBER 2014

TULARE COUNTY



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CANCER TAUGHT THIS EDUCATOR THAT IT'S OK TO SLOW DOWN

BY LISA LIEBERMAN

Most women probably lead lives a lot like Sue Sherwood's. They get up early every morning, make breakfast, go to work, come home, cook dinner and worry about everything else they think still needs to be done. They do most of the work on Thanksgiving Day, worry about other people's needs first and don't always go to the doctor when they notice something wrong with their bodies.

For Sherwood, 58, who lives in Three Rivers, it didn't take too long to find out how quickly things could go wrong when she discovered a lump in her breast about two-and-a-half years ago.

"It would be silly to say that I wasn't scared," says Sherwood. "I was scared. But I tried to be very upbeat about it because I found out about it early. But there's always that lurking in your mind."

Public person

In a town with a population of just 2,500, Sherwood, who is principal and superintendent of Three Rivers Union Elementary School, was already a very public person. After she found out about

SHERWOOD'S DIAGNOSIS

Here's how Sue Sherwood's situation played out:

"I found a lump in my breast in May 2006. I thought maybe I was drinking too much coffee or it was just a cyst, so I just kind of watched it because I had too much to think about with my son's wedding in Hawaii coming up in June," she said.

When she came back from Hawaii, she had a doctor check it out, found out she had breast cancer and underwent surgery right away. She opted for a lumpectomy instead of a mastectomy because the cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes.

Luckily for Sherwood, she caught the cancer early, and after six months of chemotherapy and radiation she has been cancer free for the past two years.

it, she became even more public.

"I was very open about it because I needed to be because I was here with the kids and they were seeing the [physical] changes I was going through. I told ▶

LIFE LESSONS

STEVE R. FUJIMOTO
Sue Sherwood makes announcements in classes Friday about the upcoming student council elections. Sherwood is the Three Rivers School District superintendent and principal.

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Sue Sherwood makes announcements in her classroom.

PHOTO BY STEVE R. FUJIMOTO.

them I had cancer and without giving them too much detail, I said I was going to have chemo and radiation and that I was probably going to lose my hair and get really sick and, some days, have to be gone. But I also said it was going to be OK, that I had discovered it early and that I was going to beat it," Sherwood says.

She continued working, going to school on the days she felt well. "I wanted to keep working because I didn't want to stay home thinking about it," Sherwood says.

The kids at school were very supportive, Sherwood says.

"They were always giving me hugs and made special cards for me. In one class, the kids all made bandanas for me. And I got 25 to 30 hats people gave me. But I never really wore them because I'm not much of a hat person," Sherwood says.

Losing her hair

For Sherwood, one of the hardest parts

was probably when she had to cut her waist-length hair.

"I hadn't cut it in 40 years and I really didn't know what I'd do with it if I ever cut it," Sherwood says.

When she started losing a lot of hair, Sherwood had her niece cut off her pony tail.

"It was sad when I first cut it. My daughter was there and we were all crying because it was reality sort of sinking in: 'This is what's going to happen,'" Sherwood says.

Eventually, Sherwood went completely bald.

"But I was OK with it because some people said I had a nicely shaped head," says Sherwood, laughing.

How cancer changed her

As soon as she finished her radiation treatments in February 2007, Sherwood grabbed a couple of girlfriends and went backpacking. In three days, ► p16

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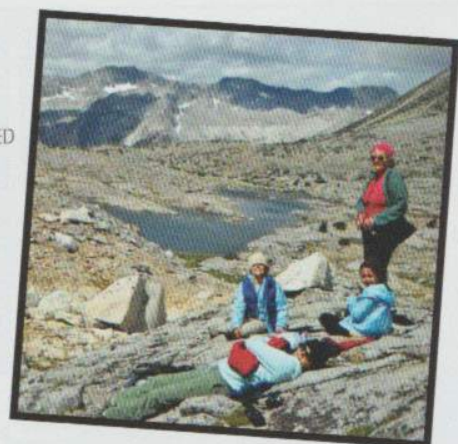
Linda Warner and Sherwood on top of Sawtooth Pass.

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Sherwood and her family prepare to hike over Bishop Pass.



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Sherwood takes a break during a day hike around Dusty Basin in August.

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"Maybe it's just the minimalist in me talking, but there's a feeling about being able to put on a pack and go from A to B and have everything you need to survive and then to just keep going and leave everything else behind."

they completed 23 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail in southern California along the Mexican/California border.

"I had to go backpacking because I had to know I was still able to do that," Sherwood says.

It took Sherwood a full year to get all of her energy back. And although she's back to normal, many of her attitudes have changed.

"I've always been someone people might say is a workaholic. This helped

me realize you can just slow down. You can just sit on the porch and read the paper, or you can just not go into work until 9 a.m. because you're not going to go home until 7 p.m. and no one's asking you to work a 12 hour day. Now I feel it's OK to take my personal needs more seriously," Sherwood says.

Taking time for herself means spending more time in her garden, with her grandchildren and backpacking.

"Backpacking revives my soul. If

I don't get into the backcountry at least once in the summer, I feel this emptiness. I need to get into the backcountry and high mountains and I need to be carrying everything I need to survive on my back.

"Maybe it's just the minimalist in me talking, but there's a feeling about being able to put on a pack and go from A to B and have everything you need to survive and then to just keep going and leave everything else behind." ■

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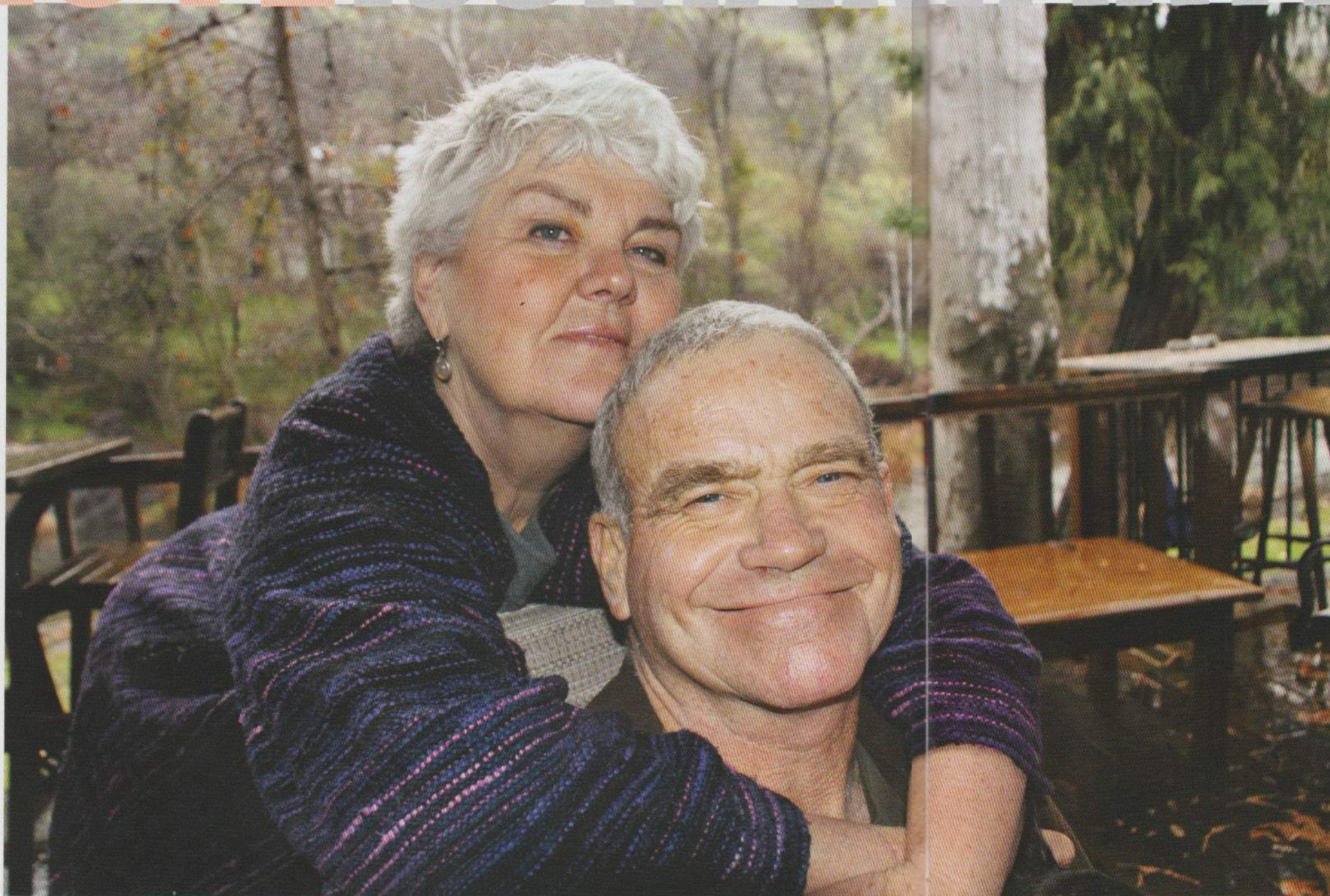
Love. stories

Couples talk about how they met and fell in love, and they share a few secrets for a strong marriage



ALSO INSIDE THE SECRET TO GREAT LEGS ■ SWEET RECIPES ■ SIGNS OF A HEALTHY HEART

LOVE IS SMART BUT FUN



TERI: I DON'T WANT TO CHANGE HIM ANY MORE THAN HE WANTS ME TO CHANGE HIM.

FRED: PEOPLE THINK THEY'RE GOING TO GET MARRIED AND LIVE HAPPILY EVER ... BUT PEOPLE WHO THINK LIKE THAT DON'T LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LISA LIEBERMAN

The deep, masculine voice on Teri and Fred Lowe's answering machine says, "Teri and I can't come to the phone right now, because we're having way too much fun." The message ends with a high-pitched giggle and an invitation to the caller to leave a message.

A lot of people don't know what to make of this.

"Some people think it's funny, other people think, 'If they're having too much fun, we better not call back,'" Fred says.

The truth is that Fred and Teri have been having way too much fun every day — for 26 years.

'Grrrrr ...'

Sitting at their kitchen table looking at old photos, in Three Rivers where they've been living for the past 22 years, they tell the story of how they met.

The two of them literally almost bumped into each other one dark night in 1983 when Fred was mining for gold at Patrick Creek near the Oregon border and Teri was working as a waitress in a local restaurant.

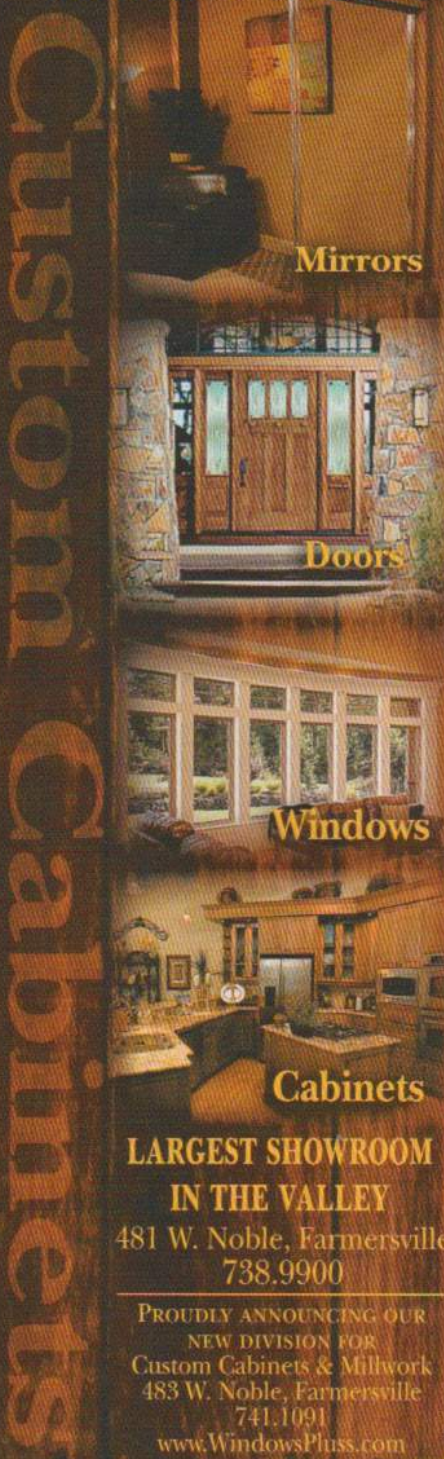
Teri was out walking one night when she spotted a man in the woods sitting with his Doberman pinscher under a plastic tarp eating in front of a fire.

"Something growled at me and I got kind of scared, so I turned around and left," Teri says. ▶



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It turned out it was Fred, not the Doberman, who growled.

"I always growled at people who came by when I was eating if I didn't know who they were," Fred says.

But Fred was a lot less scary once Teri got to know him.

The two of them met more normally two weeks later when they were at a party and Teri's truck wouldn't start. He fixed it and then as a thank-you, she knitted him a pair of socks and invited him for dinner. He came for dinner and stayed for three days.

"He was a nice guy and a nice-looking man and he had just fixed my truck. He fit my profile, even though I wasn't even thinking about meeting anyone," Teri says about her attraction to Fred.

Fred says it was simpler than that.

"She had TV," he said. "I hadn't watched TV for eight or nine years. I was so flabbergasted. I watched it for three days straight — even the commercials."

During a year-long courtship, Fred frequently ate at the restaurant where Teri worked and often tipped her with gold nuggets. On warm, summer nights, they would lie on a mattress in Fred's camper and watch the stars.

PINKY SWEAR

When the salmon started spawning and mining season came to an end, Teri bought an old bus for traveling and invited Fred to come along.

"We promised each other we wouldn't fall in love and we even made a pinky swear," Teri says.

Teri says.

They can't pinpoint when or how they fell

in love, but they do remember the proposal.

It happened one day when Fred was on his knees in the bedroom, looking for a lost boot underneath the bed. Teri said, "Awww, is this the magic moment where you're going to ask me to marry you?" Fred grunted and said, "Yeah, I guess so." They were married in 1989 in Three Rivers where they were in the process of building a house.

They lived simple lives then — no electricity, no cable TV, no telephones, no running water. They hauled wood for fires and water for drinking and bathing. They were so busy with the details of daily living there was no time to quarrel. They both also had similar life goals. Teri grew up reading Robinson Crusoe and Swiss Family Robinson and always wanted to live off the land. When she met Fred, he fit the profile.

A GOOD FIT

"They've been together for so long that they just fit," says David Lowe, Fred's son from a previous marriage. "They know exactly what to expect of each other and they fill in each other's gaps."

Teri's philosophy about relationships, before she met Fred was that when a relationship turned bad, she just left.

"I never had any bad relationships because I thought, what's the point of that? If I had problems with someone in the beginning, I was just out of there," Teri says.

Fred laughs at her bluntness but says one of the reasons the marriage works is that they respect each other's opinions.

STARTING THE DAY 'PINK'

Now that they've both turned 60, life's a lot

simpler. Their children are grown. They live in a house with all the modern amenities.

Now, rather than waiting for Valentine's Day or anniversaries to do something special for each other, they try to make each day special. Teri makes Fred lunch every day and brings it to his work site; Fred collects heart-shaped stones for Teri's garden collection.

And every day they rise before the sun and join each other in their hot tub.

"I call that our pink moment — right when the sun's coming up," Teri says. "We sit in the hot tub and look at the stars and Fred brings me my coffee and we talk about the day to come." ■

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TULARE COUNTY

Fashion for you

Meet a handful of designers who are making quite a scene in Visalia. Turns out, they're a perfect fit.

Health: Is your diet making you fat? Take our quiz on page 26.

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Food: Sonoma-style beef skewers – Cattlewomen share recipes



redesign

That dowdy, four-sizes-too big, black-and-white polka-dot dress can be turned into a short, flirty, fun pleated, semi-backless dress.

BY LISA LIEBERMAN

Buying off the rack at full price is one thing. Turning a secondhand-store find into exactly what you want is something else. For Feryn Smith, a veteran thrift-store shopper and seamstress who lives in Visalia, the possibilities are endless.

"You're only ever limited by your imagination," Smith says.



PHOTOS BY RON HOLMAN

Take for instance, the dowdy, four-sizes-too big, black-and-white polka dot dress Smith turned into a short, flirty, fun pleated, semi-backless dress.

"I love polka dots," Smith says. "There's just something so classy and timeless about them."

And who can forget Julia Roberts as Pretty Woman — the streetwalker-turned-Cinderella — decked out in a polka-dot dress, making her debut in Beverly Hills on the arm of Richard Gere?

Smith, who is also a hairdresser and artist, began sewing and altering her own clothes when she was only 16 years old.

"I just hate paying full price for something when I know I can find something and custom tailor it to fit me and make exactly what I want for a fraction of the price," Smith says.

It's not just a matter of saving money. Like any artist, Smith has a flair for taking an assortment of materials and turning them into designer-like dresses. A good example of this is a floral polyester muumuu she found at a thrift store. She cut the floral design from the fabric and made a form fitting top. Then, she cut out a different section of the muumuu and turned it into a short, ruffled skirt which she attached to the floral top. ▶

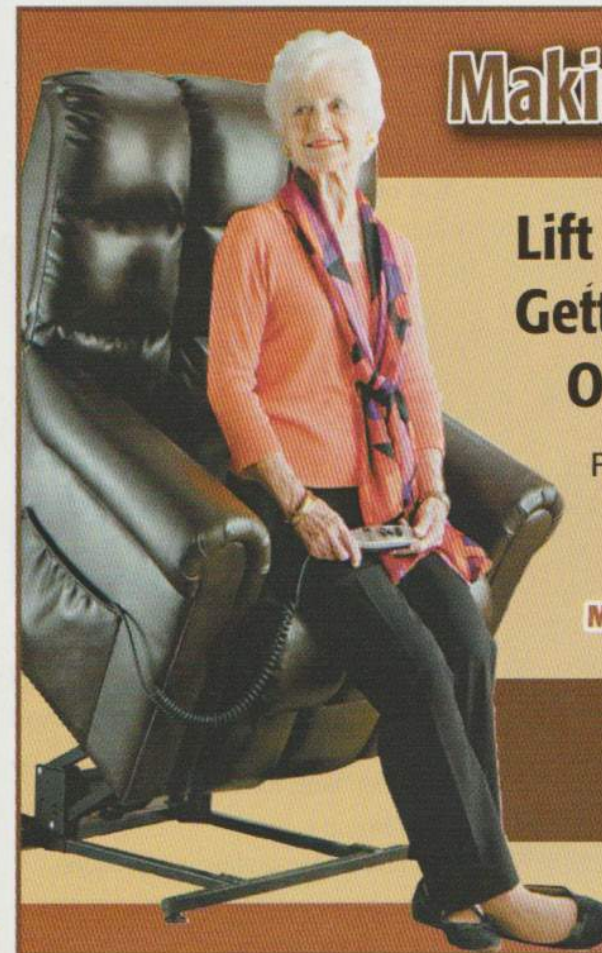
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Smith shops all around town for her materials. One of her favorite shops is the American Cancer Society's Discovery Shop on Main Street in Visalia where, sales and donations go to cancer research and support services.

When most people think "thrift shop," they think worn-out, stretched-out and old. But not so at the Discovery Shop. There you can find all kinds of name-brand designer clothes, as well as handbags and shoes, including BCBG, Tribal, J Crew, White House/Black Market, Banana Republic and Coach.

"Last month, we got a lot of stuff from BCBG including a few blazers with \$400 price tags and some little jackets with \$300 tags. It really blew me away," says Carol Farris, the Discovery Shop's manager.

Not too long ago, the shop also received two authentic diamond rings, some real furs, a baby grand piano and a very high-end stroller for triplets.

"You just never know what you're going to get when you come in here," Farris says.

The types of shoppers who patronize the store are as varied and eclectic as the kinds of clothing the store carries.

"Our customers run the gamut from everyone including the wealthy who come in with very expensive jewelry and clothing of their own right down to the penny pinchers," Farris says.

Summer Shannon, 30, who lives in Three Rivers, is a penny pincher who

... cheap thrills

hasn't been to a department store in years. And even though she's on a tight budget, she is always stylishly dressed. The fact that she shops exclusively at thrift stores enables her to buy frequently and to buy a lot.

"It's a cheap thrill," Shannon says. "Some days I might go to the store and buy a whole pile of stuff for \$12.50. Sometimes I might just get a T-shirt and a pair of socks for \$1.50 and be as happy as if I had gone to Macy's and spent \$300 on an outfit."

And although she's got a good artistic eye for clothes, Shannon isn't much of a seamstress.

"Hot glue is my best friend," she says.

If a pair of jeans or a boot or a handbag has a rip in it, she might just hot glue a piece of fur over the blemish to make it look more interesting or vintage. She also looks for deals on real feathers or fake flowers at thrift stores and uses them to make jewelry and barrettes for herself and her friends.

Most of the time, though, instead of looking for ways to add on to clothes, Shannon looks for ways to simplify them. Mostly, this means removing excess bows, fake buttons, excess straps, and frilly ribbons.

"A lot of times, clothing has too much going on with it. If it's not a functioning part of the garment, I'll take it off and it usually looks better," Shannon says.

Some of her favorite things to buy are cowboy boots, wrangler jeans, authentic furs and jewelry.

One of her best scores at a thrift store was four brand new pair of Wrangler jeans at one time, for which she paid a total of \$8.

"It's almost like sending out a request to the universe and the universe granting your wish," she said. ■



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