



AN INNOVATIVE GRASSROOTS APPROACH TO
COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PREVENTION

THE FOXFIRE PRESS

Lessons from the Field

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LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

I first left education in 2021, with a chip on my shoulder. The pandemic broke apart the cracks that had been forming for decades. By the eleventh year, I was burnt out and didn't think I would ever return to the profession. However, after my mom was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer in 2022, I relocated to Denver to be close to the airport and eventually took one last teaching job. It was listed as a semester-long assignment at an alternative school in a public district. The student population was considered "at-risk" youth, a label I've never particularly cared for. Despite everything going on, I was able to raise their test scores from the mid-forties to the mid-eighties in four months. Teaching has always felt like an art form, and I thrived in this world. Throughout my career people would ask me what my secret was, and I never had an answer. Initially, I honestly thought it was my temperament. However, once I started building my professional career in wildfire, I quickly realized the need to figure out the answer to that question.

On my last day of teaching in 2021, my students lovingly relocated my desk into the bathroom. They also teepeed my classroom. I was equally impressed and touched by the gesture.

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Once I knew where to look, the correlations between the education and fire worlds became glaringly obvious. Digging deep to the root of my success in the classroom, I discovered the key takeaway I had been searching for, and trying to verbalize for almost three months now. As a teacher, I was never able to get a resistant teenager to do what was needed through shame and guilt. My success was based on the principle that having a human connection with students is an easier approach to classroom management, content delivery, and getting results. Employing shame and guilt is an antiquated way of leading, and it only creates further tension. However, it's an approach we have been using for community risk and reduction. That is not a shame or criticism, but an understanding that those of us in this profession feel very passionate about what we're doing. We see the urgency in the situation! But we're still stuck.

When the Park Fire broke out near Chico, California, I was talking to my curriculum partner, whose expertise is in education. She said something compelling that has stuck with me. I told her Butte County is one of the most heavily managed forests in the country, but we're still seeing megafires because of x,y,z [1]. Her response was, "I think humans who are heavily managed would also agree that MAY not be the right or only answer..." Her answer was the perfect summary for all of it. We don't have a wildfire problem, we have a connection crisis. In order to solve it, we need to learn how to connect again.

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For example, one of the schools I worked for valued experiential-based education, which meant we got to take our kids on a lot of cool and innovative trips. However, being a CYA-kind-a gal, and an "at-risk" teenager myself, I understood the complications that came with those experiences. To COA, we had a meeting with students and their guardians before every trip. We went over the rules and expectations, as well as the consequences, and then we made everyone sign the paper in front of us. Inevitably, we were faced with an incident where substances were discovered on a trip out of state.

Because of the steps taken prior to departure, the students didn't even try to argue once they were caught. Because of the connection we had built, we were able to have a very honest conversation about substance abuse. They were worried we were disappointed in them, which is an anxiety we can ALL relate to. With that being said, in the moment, it felt like the most important thing I could tell them was that one poor decision does not determine the rest of their life or the value of their character. When we are aware of the levity our jobs can bring, it's so important to be mindful of what we are saying when confronted with unexpected obstacles and challenges. What could have been a nightmare turned into a true learning experience for all of us.

1. Feel free to reach out about what x,y,z represent.

My second story is a little more personal. During my mother's fifteen month battle with cancer, I went back home to Indiana eleven times to be with her as much as possible. As the disease progressed, I often found myself truly shocked by her grace. It's been my experience that a human's true integrity comes out when we are suffering the most, and this was the perfect example. She had every right to be angry, and bitter, but I never heard her complain about it. Part of that was generation, and part of that was just how she was made.

Through it all, she continued to be a pillar of her community. Specifically, there was a socially vulnerable woman in the community that lived alone, didn't have much in the way of family and friends, and had several medical conditions that made daily activities hard for her. One being smoking. My Momma, who hated cigarette smoking her whole life, would visit this woman every morning, take her outside and sit with her while she smoked a cigarette. Nicotine is a battle I've fought to this day, and something I was grounded for at sixteen when my parents caught me. Yet, this struck me because it was the epitome of who my mother was. Every day, she completed an act of service to her community, despite her personal opinions. That was how she showed up in the world.

My mother could have chosen to spend their time together differently by telling her quitting would make her feel better, maybe even improve her quality of life. However, she understood the urgency of time, and the importance of picking and choosing your battles. Instead of harping on the negative and trying to impact the outcome, she focused on the connection and the friendship. She maximized the potential benefit of that friendship by accepting the woman as she was, and choosing to love her anyway. In the end, as simple as the metaphor seems, helping the woman smoke a cigarette was a simple gesture that improved the quality of (mental) life and their connection, no matter how either felt about the activity.



The first year I taught at the school that utilized experiential-based learning, I took my students on a road trip that included St. Louis and Chicago. In between the two, we stopped at my parents house for a few rest days. The students took over the whole property, and my parents absolutely loved it. This is one of my favorite memories from teaching.

After my mom passed in April of 2023, I began building Foxfire WUI while processing her death. The first six months were spent spinning my wheels as I became overwhelmed by the magnitude of our wildfire problem until I realized this - as a country, we're going through a similar grieving period over the loss of how safe we used to feel. Between COVID and the extreme weather events, we are being taught that our lives can change and be turned upside down in a matter of moments. We're riddled with trauma from the political tension, wars, violence, and events that feel out of our control. It's the same feeling as losing a parent. At times, it has felt like running from one battle (education) to another (wildfire). I imagine, it's similar to how first responders feel right now that have been battling wildfires in the west for the past six months, and are now being activated to the east to assist with hurricane relief. We're all exhausted. We're tired, hungry, cranky, and begging to be understood. We all just want someone to sit with us while we smoke a cigarette and try to regulate our nervous system, and that is exactly the Foxfire WUI recommendation/approach to Community Risk Reduction.

Leaning into prior professional and personal experience has taught me how valuable these same principals are to community risk reduction. Our goal should be to empower communities by building wildfire suppression and prevention capacity so that they can be self-reliant and more protected when a wildfire ignites. Part of empowering communities includes building their wildfire suppression capacity. There seems to be a division between suppression and prevention, but you cannot talk about one without the other. Wildfire is a growing industry, with urgent and immediate needs. Before we can connect with anyone else to achieve these common goals together, we need to be connecting with each other as humans. Suppression is vital to life, property and structure protection. Yet, fires are burning so hot and moving so quickly that suppression is becoming more and more difficult. Consequently, prevention planning and projects are vital to maximizing safety. However, if we're struggling with the conversation, maybe we should consider a different approach. For that to be done, we might have to take a bruise to the ego. It's not easy when we hear ideals that are vastly different from our own, especially in the current political climate. I am fully aware of the perception of the "outsider." It's a narrative that can kill good intentions before a conversation can even begin. So how do I approach rural communities, with that knowledge, and still manage to accomplish my objectives? I let shit go. Working with teenagers has led me to realize you don't have to agree with someone to get them on your side. Watching my mother die taught me to fight for the things that really matter, and to let the rest go. Because if a human connection is established before the work begins, your differences no longer matter because you're already on the same page. That page is JUST about the task at hand- building wildfire suppression capacity AND wildfire prevention planning. This critical disconnect between suppression and prevention will only keep us stuck, and we can choose a different way.