

Remembering Jan Perttu's leadership

by Jim Labbe

In the spring of 1996—one year out of college—I had the opportunity to live and work in the Applegate Valley. The Applegate River Watershed Council hired me to work with the Watershed Council staff and the Applegate Partnership board on specific restoration and conservation projects.

In the Applegate, I found myself apprenticed to an amazing group of individuals working to build and enrich their community while fostering a model for ecologically sustainable watershed management. I got to work with so many outstanding individuals those two-plus years. The entire Applegate community gave me enormous inspiration to help build stronger, more sustainable communities in Oregon. But Jan Perttu in particular had a tenacious, selfless, and unique brand of leadership that I have consciously sought to model in my own life ever since.

Jan was someone with an inherent sense of her own significance and ability to make positive change in the world. Yet she simultaneously embodied C.S. Lewis's definition of humility, a state of "not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less." It was Jan's combination of confidence and humility that allowed her to persuade and inspire the community to try new approaches of interacting with each other and the land, the Applegate Valley. And she did this with a spontaneous brilliance and dogged work ethic that I witnessed regularly in our time working together.

I distinctly remember Jan's leadership the winter 1997 when she took on the herculean task of helping landowners document property damage and secure help recovering from the massive flood that winter. At the time, we were understaffed and overworked at the Watershed Council; we were trying to push several projects—already behind schedule—forward to completion.

I recall second-guessing Jan, wondering how we could manage to drop almost everything and function as the de facto emergency response center for the community. But it was not long before I realized what she was doing. The flood was a horrendous disaster for our neighbors. It was the right thing to do to help our neighbors, the people we served. But it was also a tremendous opportunity to build trust, goodwill, and foster smarter, safer, and more ecologically sustainable land-use in the Applegate Valley floodplain. The flood was a teachable moment for the community. Jan saw the opportunity for positive change and seized it in the most effective way I can imagine.

After I left the Applegate in 1998, I would see Jan very infrequently. But the few times we spoke, I felt a heightened sense of what I had received from her. I am forever grateful for my chance to work with her and the critical role she played in fostering my own sense of who I am and how I want to try to lead in the world.

Jim Labbe
971-222-6112
Urban Conservationist
Audubon Society of Portland
jlabbe@urbanfauna.org