Smithsonian Folklife Interview[1]

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Girdwood, Alaska

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Interviewer: Teresa Haug
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I began work with the Forest Service in 1974 when I was going to school at the University of Washington in the College of Forest Resources. I started doing some recreation research for the Wenatchee National Forest through a graduate program and continued from there. It was a recreation user study of dispersed road recreation use on the Wenatchee National Forest, trying to ascertain what users were doing in the forest so that the Forest Service could learn how to develop proper management plans for different kinds of use.

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When I was in fifth grade, my class from Vancouver, Washington went to the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. My best friend's father was a ranger for the Gifford Pinchot. He took our class into the forest and talked about the trees, the environment, and the health of the resource. It really stuck with me. Later, I determined I wanted to become an interpretative naturalist and a good place to do that was the Forest Service. In the 1970s, Dr. Grant Sharp had a good program at the University of Washington College of Forest Resources. I determined that I would get a degree in forestry with a specialty in interpretation and that's what I did.

The best way to define what an interpretative naturalist does is take basic scientific information and interpret it for the general public. Today, the word "naturalist" is often dropped, and we are referred to as "interpreters." Now, we also cover historic interpretation, and talk about different kinds of cultures, archaeological or anthropological information, and natural resource information. If we make the message entertaining to some degree without being silly, the public will retain it.

One might say Gifford Pinchot was our first interpreter. To some degree, he was interpreting to Congress and helping to form our future. We kick-started interpretation in the traditional sense in the Alaska region, surprisingly enough, over 30 years ago. We started a partnership with the Alaska Marine Highway System providing interpreters onboard what was then called "the Blue Canoes" or the ferries that travel through the waters of Alaska. It was a match made in heaven. It really was one of the important first steps that the Forest Service took into the world of interpretation. I'm sure there are many other examples, but for the Alaska Region that was a very important example.

[1] Interview not verbatim. Breaks in conversation indicated by …

We are just about everywhere, with the exception of in the air, and maybe that's coming. I am responsible for our partnership with the Alaska Railroad. We still have a partnership with the Alaska Marine Highway System on the Tongass National Forest and the Chugach National Forest. We also have a partnership with Holland American Lines aboard *the MV Ptarmigan* on Portage Lake. We lead walks and talks on nature trails and within the context of a variety of facilities. Beyond that, we're also in classrooms and out in nature when it becomes a classroom for many of the school children that come to see us.

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I'm a very avid backcountry enthusiast and was lucky to snag a job as a "wilderness ranger" for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the Eagle Cap Wilderness in Northeastern Oregon. That was just a fantastic job. I did that in the summer of 1975, 1976, and 1977.

A wilderness ranger basically serves as a Forest Service presence in a designated wilderness, or sometimes in non-designated wilderness, wilderness study area or backcountry area. In my case, I was in the Eagle Cap Wilderness. At 365,000 acres it is the largest wilderness area in Oregon, and attracts people that like to travel by horse and mule, people that like to travel on their own feet, and hunters. You get a variety of people going out to have "the wilderness experience." The Forest Service finds that it's a very good idea to have a presence in the wilderness to help educate the public and answer questions. It's an interpretive position in a way. The wilderness ranger does the nuts and bolts work in the wilderness, which can take the form of trail work and cleaning up messy camps. Many times I'd go in behind a messy hunting group to breakdown the camp, burn the refuse, and pack out the trash on a horse or on my own back.

The backcountry ranger takes inventory of campsites. That includes the limits of acceptable change on sites, or what used to be called "minimum impact" and is now called "leave-no-trace" camping. You're making sure the wilderness is staying a wilderness as much as you possibly can. One of the keys is to educate the public so they can help you in that arena.

When I worked for the Eagle Cap the first season, I worked out of Union, Oregon on the south side from Eagle Cap, which is the central hub peak south on the Minor River drainage. The next two seasons, I worked out of the Pine Ranger District, which was also on the south side of the Eagle Cap, but it was on the southeast side rather than the southwest side of the Eagle Cap Wilderness. The terrain were very mountainous, but drier. There are more rattlesnakes to cope with.

I slept under the stars. I would take a tarp about 9' x 12' and string a line between two trees and guy it out. If the mosquitoes were bad, I would wear a head net went I went to bed at night. The net was lightweight, and my pack on average weighed about 70 pounds when I left at the beginning of a 10-day hitch. I packed firefighting tools because I was the first line of defense for fighting forest fire. There were a lot of lightning strikes. The tools were a good percentage of the weight: a Pulaski tends to weigh quite a bit. I carried only 10 pounds of food, and that was usually freeze-dried, but boy, it tasted good when you've just got a little bit with you. You eat every scrap of it. By the end of a 10-day period I would have eaten the last raisin—it was down the hatch and already metabolized.

Basically I was on foot. I did have an assist periodically from a packer guide named Janet O'Brien. We would schedule that ahead of time. She was wonderful with horses and mules. I would clean, and then make arrangements for her to come in and meet me at a junction of trails. I gave her a list of stockpiled garbage I picked up in gunnysacks and stitched off so the garbage wouldn't fall out. She would load the sacks on the horses or the mules, then grab them and be off.

I had ten days in the wonderful work environment of nature, and then four days off back in one of the small communities that I was based out of.

In the 1970s, Eagle Cap Wilderness hadn't been discovered by a large number of people yet. The north side of the wilderness had the lakes basin and was visited by people from Wallowa and Joseph. But on the south side where I was, I saw an average of only ten people every ten days. Sometimes they would be botanists. The Wallowa Mountains are the cusp botanically between the Cascade Range and the Rockies, so there are species of plants that don't exist anywhere else. For some reason, I'd run into scientists. I'd run into horsemen. I'd run into backpackers. But without fail, they were people who were at home in wild places and not particularly lonely out there. They were glad to be there and have all that space around them. They also tended to be very friendly. I was always thrilled to have somebody to talk to.

On that job, I never was involved in a rescue. I did provide first aid for minor cuts or scrapes. In that location, I didn't see anyone really hurt themselves, which is maybe testament to their abilities out in the backcountry.

If there was a lightning strike, I had to gain high ground to call in a fire by radio. Frequently I would be in the midst of an electrical storm, and that's the time you don't want to gain high ground because you are putting yourself at risk. I would have to wait until things had died down and I thought somebody would be on the dispatch and receive my call. As first line of defense I would try to put the smoke out. Frequently the rain that would handle that itself.

An occurrence at Flatrock Camp was very exciting. I got very little sleep. I kept a journal from the start to the end of a lightning storm, which was one strike after another. There were trees on fire that weren't too far from me. There was so much static electricity that my hair was standing on end. I threw things that were metal outside the tent because they were making a buzzing, whirring noise. I pitched out my ice ax and other metal tools by the wooden handles. I was praying. I counted between strikes, from when I saw the flash to when I heard it. It just got closer and closer and closer. I had lightning strikes all around me. As it turned out, I was camped on a boulder with a lot of metal in it! In retrospect, that was probably not the best, but I was trying to have a minimum impact on the vegetation. It was just a real intriguing night. Finally when the storm died down, I went to sleep. About four in the morning, I could hear something munching and it was inside the very small tarp I was in. I thought, "What is that?" The next morning when I got up, there was every sign that a porcupine had joined me for a portion of the evening. He'd eaten through my leather sandals, which were basically my camp shoes. He'd eaten the leather sheath off my ax and Pulaski. He'd eaten the straps off of my backpack, so I had to tie one-inch webbing to my frame pack and haul it out that way. It was a 16-mile hike out, and the frame was cutting into me. But I didn't fault him. The animals in that part of the world are salt poor, and

anything that's made of leather or been sweated on is very interesting to a porcupine or a deer! They're always trying to get at it. Like I told you, I threw it out of the tent, so it was easy for the porcupine to get.

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I next worked in Denali National Park for the National Park Service. When I was graduating from the University of Washington, I was the chairperson for the Environmental Affairs Commission at the University of Washington. I was interviewed for a position with a research team. I was selected as one of four people to go into Denali and do a sociological impact study that lead to the zoning system we have today in Denali National Park. Professor Peter Wambel was the Ph.D. candidate who was doing his work in Denali, Katmai, and Glacier Bay. He was doing three different studies with teams of people simultaneously. He wanted to use public input to determine the toleration people have for seeing other people when they are in the backcountry. His study lead to the present zoning system, coupled with Park Service standards of not overly impacting wildlife. The blending of those two things that lead to the over thirty zones that exist in Denali National Park and how many user nights each of those zones can receive.

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I'd be glad to give a description of the difference between the national forests and the national parks. First of all, the Forest Service is and has been all along a multiple-use agency. We are under the Department of Agriculture. The National Park Service is under the Department of the Interior. Our roles are in some ways the same, but in other ways different. As a multiple-use agency, the Forest Service has a responsibility to the public to manage our lands for a number of different uses that include wildlife, timber, and a lot of resources used in a variety of ways that can be either consumptive or recreational. Some recreational uses are consumptive as well, such as fishing and hunting. Non-consumptive may be camping under the stars or taking photographs. We're charged with keeping that system in balance on the national forests. The National Park Service's main mission is to preserve and protect and to make lands available to the public for recreational pursuits so that they can go into wild and beautiful settings. The National Park Service also manages a number of historic parks to preserve and protect the history of an historic home or building or battle site to keep it true to its history.

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My first trip to Alaska was very exciting. I left Seattle at the old Alaska Marine Highway docks on John Muir's birthday. I got off in Haines and drove to Anchorage. I stayed with my sister in Anchorage, and then took a train to Denali. I was actually employed by the University of Washington, but I was part of the Park Service. They adopted us for the season so that we worked the backcountry desk. We had interesting schedules. I would explain our study to people from behind the backcountry desk for a time, and then I would go work in the backcountry. I was also responsible for a day user study. I interviewed people at the Savage River Campground to find out what were they doing during the day. Were they getting out into the park, or just staying in their vehicles and looking at the view? I spent months at the University of Washington that following winter entering all this data (this was the era of putting in all the data on punch cards).

The questionnaires that we had were 47 pages long and we got 87 percent response, which I still think is a record. People were excited to be a part of that study and it was wonderful.

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I got two more positions with the Park Service: one in a national landmark study with the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service; then, one as an historian for the Klondike Historic Park. For the record, I think it might be important to note that when Ronald Reagan was elected, the field of interpretation "took it in the shorts." It was a very tough game to get a job as an interpretive naturalist, regardless of your educational background. The Reagan administration cut the funding to the National Park Service and the Forest Service for interpretation. The first year Ronald Reagan was in office, there were 50,000 applications for 15 interpretive positions in Mt. Rainier National Park, to give you a sense of how difficult it was to make the cut. It wasn't just interpretation, was education. Education and interpretation are linked very closely and should be. Funding cuts led to fewer interpreters in the field. Being a survivor, I thought, "How can I use my skills?" I'm basically a backcountry enthusiast with a forestry degree and a specialization in interpretation. I was newly married and moving to Colorado. I decided to apply for jobs with the outdoor industry. I was hired to help open the first Recreation Equipment, Inc. store in Colorado. I was a retail supervisor for REI Co-op for six years; I helped open the Salt Lake City store and worked in the Portland store. Finally things loosened up and I thought I could again get a job working for the Forest Service or the Park Service.

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When George Bush came to office, things looked up. Bush was willing to put more money and resources into education, including the education about public lands. My husband and I decided we missed Alaska. We had both lived there, but didn't know each other at the time. We decided to quit our jobs and move back to Alaska. So on a wing and a prayer, we visited friends in Wrangell, Alaska for the winter. I met a couple at a concert in Wrangell at the elementary school one evening. I was taking money for tickets. The person I worked with was the wife of a Forest Service employee. We started chatting in between selling tickets. She said, "Who are you, and what do you do?" I said, "I'm Lezlie Murray. Most recently I worked for the Forest Service." (I had done a stint as a forest fire protection officer on the Wenatchee National Forest as my husband and I were on our way up to Alaska). She said, "Oh really, my husband works for the Forest Service." We started talking, and on I met her husband, Dave Rak. Dave said, "What do you do?" I said, "Well, basically my training is in interpretation although most recently I was a firefighter and a protection officer." He said, "You know, we just lost a woman who worked in our district in interpretation and education. Perhaps we could pick you up as a volunteer because we're doing a cabin history project." I said, "I'd love to do that! I've been hanging nets for fisherman, but I could do that on the side and still make some money." So that's how I got involved with the Alaska region. I started as a volunteer to do their cabin history project. I worked two back-to-back, not-to-exceed-one-year appointments. I was then picked up as an ANILCA hire, and eventually became indispensable, I guess. They decided they just had to hire me as a permanent employee! I was in Wrangell for 9 years and loved building the interpretation and education program there, and developing partnerships and helping the public to better

understand what it is the Forest Service was doing on the Tongass National Forest, specifically on the Wrangell District and the Stikine area.

"ANILCA hiring" came about with the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act that was signed by President Jimmy Carter at the end of 1979. It is a very voluminous act that has a lot of implications for the way lands are managed in Alaska. The act allows for the hiring of local people who have local knowledge, with the key idea to assist in the hiring of Alaska Native people. We have a wealth of Native people who live in the small communities throughout Southeast Alaska, throughout Prince William Sound, and throughout Alaska. The original idea for ANILCA local hiring was to diversify our culture and workplace and bring in people who really know a lot about the area. In some conditions, people that are not non-Alaska Natives like myself were hired because they had valuable knowledge of the area and conservation units that were part of ANILCA. There were 13 wilderness areas created as part of ANILCA, many of which are on national forest lands in Alaska. In my case it was the Stikine LeConte Wilderness Area and the South Etolin Wilderness. To apply for the job you had to answer a number of questions that required specific knowledge of the area.

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I came to Wrangell in 1989 and volunteered for three months and then started working in 1990 for the Forest Service. I left that position with tears because I really didn't want to go, but I had an opportunity I couldn't pass up in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. I left in March of 1997. Altogether I guess it was a little over 8 years.

There is a place in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area that is being managed by the Forest Service, which is unusual. Through a fairly complicated bit of legislation, part of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and part of the Mt. Hood National Forest were shaved off. A corridor was created that was dubbed by Congress as the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. It extends from the Dalles in Eastern Oregon down river all the way past Stevenson, Washington, and past Multnohman Falls and just outside of Troutdale, Oregon, on the Oregon side. It's a wonderful, wonderful place. I grew up in Vancouver, Washington, so I'm a little bit prejudiced about how wonderful it is. You're traveling between a rain forest environment and the desert in a little over 60 miles. It's just amazing. Congress, too, saw that that it was too and that's why they created it. I had the opportunity to be in charge of interpretation and education at the Columbia River Gorge Discovery Center.

The Discovery Center is an amazingly beautiful structure that has interpretative exhibits that explain the natural and cultural history of the gorge, including the building of the railroad through the gorge, and the roadway that goes through the gorge. The center is managed through a number of partnerships. One of the main partners is Wasco County where the Dalles is located. If you were to cut the facility in half, one half of it is the Wasco County Historical Museum, and the other half is the Gorge Discovery Center, which is part of the Forest Service. The separation creates some very interesting and delicate management issues. Trying to partner that way isn't always an easy thing and requires the right personalities to pull it off.

Partnerships in the Forest Service go way back. Partnerships for the Forest Service allow us to do things that we couldn't do otherwise. If we keep our eye on the prize and realize that our goal is to get good educational material and information to the public to help them better appreciate their public lands, then going into these partnerships allows us flexibility that we would otherwise not have. It allows us to enlarge the scope and the scale of what we're able to do for the public.

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I cannot tell a lie—I love Alaska. Kristi Kantola, head of interpretation and education in the Alaska Region, kept in touch with me. We were working together on a conference that was going to occur in Anchorage through the National Association for Interpretation. We were program chairs. She let me know the job as director for the Begich, Boggs Visitor Center was coming up. I had known several past managers and had great respect for them. I knew the job was close to my sister. I threw my hat in the ring and I'll be darned if they didn't hire me. I've been here for the last five years.

I'd be glad to tell you a little bit about the Chugach National Forest and the Begich, Boggs Visitor Center. The Chugach National Forest became a forest in 1907. It was much larger then than it is today. We now have somewhere between 5.6 and 5.7 million acres. It's second only to the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska that has around 16.7 million acres. We're about a third the size of the Tongass, but still a very large chunk of real estate.

The Begich, Boggs Visitor Center serves as the visitor center for the Chugach National Forest. We're in a location 55 miles southeast of Anchorage, the major population center for the state of Alaska. The last census for Anchorage was 264,000 people in the year 2000, so we have over half the state's population. When you add in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley where Palmer and Wasilla are, we've got a large chunk of the population. Many visitors come through South central Alaska via cruise ships, ferries, or air travel.

In the 1970s the Forest Service had a trailer out on the edge of Portage Lake, off the edge of one of the terminal moraines of Portage Glacier, and the public loved it. They loved driving up the valley, talking to interpreters, and going on nature hikes. The winds in Portage are legend. We frequently get winds of 70 mph or better. In fact, we had winds that actually broke the system at 137 mph, and snapped our flagpoles in two like twigs. They were laid out in our parking lot. These are poles that are geared to take 150 mph. What happened, with those kinds of winds, it that the trailer blew apart and parts of it were found as far away as Hope across Turnagain Arm. It's just a wild place. I like to call it the armpit of Turnagain Arm. If you drive up the arm, you eventually come to the pit, and that would be Portage. The reason why that wild weather exists there is because we are at the narrowest point of the Kenai Peninsula and weather funnels from Prince William Sound over Portage Pass which is only 750 feet high, then across Portage Lake at high speeds, and down Portage Valley to Turnagain Arm. We're caught on the dividing line.

Hale Boggs and Nick Begich, two representatives to Congress were traveling by plane from Anchorage to Juneau in a small fixed wing Cessna flight with a fellow named Don Johns. Their flight never made it to Juneau. Hale Boggs was a fairly well-known representative, very well

respected, and he was up in Alaska to help get Nick Begich re-elected and they were campaigning and stumping in Juneau. That's where they were headed. Senator Ted Stevens decided after talking with the Forest Service, that a well-constructed building should be built near Portage Lake to commemorate the memory of Begich and Boggs—hence the name Begich, Boggs for our visitor center.

The name at the same time helps people better understand the glaciers that are so dominant in Portage Valley, and for that matter, on the Chugach National Forest and throughout the Tongass as well. That mission has changed a little bit over time as Portage Glacier has receded out of view around a corner. It's still in the lake, but Portage Glacier is no longer visible from the visitor center. Since the Alaska Railroad enlarged the tunnel to Whittier in 2000 so that cars can now travel back and forth, more people are traveling to Prince William Sound. With the glacier no longer in view and Prince William Sound being visited by many more people, the Forest Service determined it was time to change the exhibits at the visitor center from just focusing purely on glaciers to looking at Prince William Sound and the rest of the forest. So we undertook that project and reopened the visitor's center with brand name exhibits on June 11, 2001.

A lot of people call Prince William Sound a jewel and there are many reasons for that. There are numerous small islands and many large islands. It's the farthest northern extent of the temperate rain forest in North America. Actually Girdwood is the farthest northern extent. In Prince William Sound, the lowlands are all temperate rain forest while the high country is very craggy, beautiful, sculpted rocks and lots of glaciers. The juxtaposition of the sea and the fiords and islands and all that rock and ice is incredibly pleasing to the eye. Wildlife abounds in Prince William Sound. It is truly a beautiful place. Fishing is, of course, a major factor in communities like Cordova and Seward. That's a big part of what they do. But what really brought attention to Prince William Sound (even though exploration had been going on there for the last several hundred years by people as far-flung as the British, the Spanish, and the Russians), was the Herman Expedition in 1899. They had John Muir, John Burrows, William Dahl, and Edward S. Curtis onboard. These people visited and took a lot of photographs Edward S. Curtis named Nellie Juan College Fiord. All the glaciers were named for Ivy League schools, Harvard and so forth. It was interesting; the press was all over it at that time. The Western World became aware of Prince William Sound and how beautiful it was and what its resources were like. Of course, later then it became part of the Chugach National Forest. For over a century now when people travel to Alaska, they want to be sure and visit Prince William Sound.

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The first thing I do every day is to get my team of 18 together. We put our heads together and take a quick look at what we're doing that day. On an average day, one person will be driving through the Whittier Tunnel and getting onboard the *MV Bartlett* for a 2-day hitch on the ferry, I have to make sure there's a car for that. One of my other people will head over to the boat dock on Portage Lake to go out on the *MV Ptarmigan*, so I make sure there's a vehicle for that. Another person will be deployed to the Alaska Railroad, so there's a vehicle for that.

We make sure we have fresh flowers in all the rooms. We get everything looking tip-top. We open the doors promptly at 9:00 a.m. and welcome the visitors with flags flying. We start the day

with someone showing the 35-mm award-winning documentary film, *Voices From the Ice* in the 200-seat auditorium. We do that through a recreation fee demonstration project. I might be on cashier sales. I'm one of six collection officers who can sell tickets to the movie. If that's my gig, I make an announcement at 9:10 and start selling tickets. If somebody else is on that duty, I may have the luxury to be back in my office completing a janitorial inspection, writing up a log, or doing the banking for the week. I might be coaching one of my staff.

We do programs in the mornings and programs in the afternoons. Depending on the day of the week, it might be an ice worm safari on Byron Glacier Trail. People hike up that trail with our interpreter and learn all about ice worms and why it is they live in that environment and what makes them special as annelids. They collect some worms to bring back to the center to display at the front desk. We have a "catch and release" program, so we return worm from the past hike and hand out ice worm hunting licenses for people that were successful. I might be doing a program on the research we're doing on bats in caves in Alaska, or a program on bear safety and how to behave if you're a camper or hiker around bears. Lately, we've had a black bear with two cubs on the Byron Glacier Trail, It's very important that we get those messages out to the public.

One of our other duties is roving patrol where we clean up the dispersed recreation sites. We make contacts with people and answer questions in an impromptu fashion. We restock the outhouses in the valley with toilet paper and take the trash. Those are the kinds of things I'm involved in on a day-to-day basis. Also, we have a lot of people that are on guided tours that come to the visitor's center. Some of those guides have special use permits. They need to have that in place to bring visitors, and frequently set it up with us to do some sort of a special experience. I may schedule someone to do a scavenger hunt for a younger group, or give a special presentation on the geology or gold mining to an older group.

You know, curiously enough, there's more than one type of "typical" visitor. One of the typical visitor would be someone from Outside. They may have come by plane. They may have come by cruise ship or by ferry or they may be an "adventure traveler" as we dub them driving up to see us. They've come all the way on the Alcan in a motor home or a little pickup. All of those people have their own questions and needs. The other visitors we see are people from South central Alaska. We'll see the same person five or six times in a season. They say, "Hey, Lezlie, it's me, Betty. We have relatives from Minnesota," or, "They're in from Sheboygan" We see a lot of repeat visitors who consider us a second home.

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I would like to share the final thought about my career with the Forest Service and working in Alaska in particular, and that's what a privilege it is. Every day I pinch myself when I get up. I'm in the most beautiful place in the world. I've done a lot of traveling, so I can say that and mean it. I can talk about the quality of the people that I work with and live with in Alaska. They are rugged individualists. They'll help you out in a heartbeat. They're there for you when you need them, but they're not in your way when you don't need them. It's the best of all worlds to be here. I just love it, and every day I thank the Forest Service for allowing me to work for them.

If I had a crystal ball to look into the future, I see the field of interpretation getting better and better. Interpreters in this field for this agency will get better and better at learning what it is we can do to meet the needs of the public. We will improve our abilities to connect with people from different cultures who speak different languages. At this point, we struggle a bit with people that aren't just Americans or English-speakers or that are differently-abled, but we're learning more all the time. I see strides being made all the time. We're becoming more professional and the agency has recognized and will continue to recognize the value of good interpretation as a tool to help the public better understand their public lands.

END OF INTERVIEW