INTERVIEW WITH A WOODIE, Ron Perry
By Marvin Spreyne

The Woodies selected one of their volunteers, Ron Perry, to be interviewed for the newsletter. The MCFSC’s board treasurer, Marvin Spreyne, conducted the interview.

Marvin: What are the Woodies and when did they get started?
Ron: In 2002 a group of community-minded individuals saw that some of the mountain residents were in need of assistance with their fire abatement as their health and or financial situation prevented them from doing the abatement by themselves. The area at the time had an infestation of Bark Beetle that was destroying trees leaving wood that could be fuel for another fire.

Marvin: When did you start your adventure with the Woodies?
Ron: In 2003 I became acquainted with the Woodies program and how it benefits so many worthy people and immediately became a dedicated member.

Marvin: What are the requirements to be a Woodie?
Ron: One must be physically fit, be capable of working as a group and have the desire to serve the residents of the mountain communities.

All new volunteers, both men and women, must be evaluated before they are authorized to use a chain saw or the splitter though they can help load the splitter. They will be assigned a ‘shadow’ to mentor them through the learning process. Most likely they’ll start “learning the ropes” by moving logs around. A dry pine log may weigh 35-40 pounds while a wet one could weigh 65-75 pounds. Oak logs are much heavier. They’ll also operate a wheelbarrow filled with wood to an area to stack it.

All Woodies attend safety meetings where equipment use and procedures are discussed. All Woodies must have medical insurance that in the event of a mishap they would use that insurance coverage. In 13 years no one has been seriously hurt. The Woodies operate under the umbrella of the MCFSC.

Marvin: What equipment does the Woodies have to perform this valuable community service?
Ron: We started with a 40 ton splitter that is still being used. Approximately 5 years ago the Woodies acquired a 30 ton splitter. We also have 3 chainsaws that we purchased and 5 chainsaws that were donated to the cause. All volunteers are advised to possess good leather gloves, steel-toed shoes, a helmet and ear plugs, chaps and a chainsaw are optional.

Marvin: How many Woodies are currently on the roll, how often do they perform their community function and where do they operate?
Ron: We have 13 active Woodies, of which 5 are women. We are doing our service every Friday, weather permitting. All work is done at the Help Center in Idyllwild. Logs are dropped off by contractors providing fire abatement services.

Marvin: What financial resources do the Woodies have available for them to operate?
Ron: Through donations directly to the Woodies and to the Fire Safe Council. Jeff Stone, our former Riverside County 3rd District Board Supervisor, also had the county provide a good chunk of money to the cause and most recently the Idyllwild and Pine Cove Homeowners Associations most graciously made donations to the Woodies.

Marvin: Have the Woodies been involved in the search for the Goldspotted Oak Borer threatening the area oak trees?
Ron: Yes! We have four Woodies that are actively inspecting the area oak trees and working in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service, Riverside County Fire and the University of California Cooperative Extension. This beetle is native to Guatemala, southern Mexico and southeastern Arizona and it’s believed that it was introduced into southern California on firewood or expanded its range from native regions. It’s imperative that no oak firewood is brought to our mountain communities.

Marvin: Besides the ‘normal’ service provided by the Woodies is there anything that really stands out?
Ron: Besides having fire abated approximately 1000 homes in 13 years I need to mention the following experiences:

In 2004 the Strawberry Fuel Break needed to be tied to the Pine Cove Fuel Break. This involved U.S.F.S. land. This project was the first time a non-U.S.F.S. entity operated on forest land. The project took about 7 months with 25 volunteers working in unison with on occasion upwards to 50. While no ‘clear cutting’ occurred the finished project provided a natural park setting. The special recognition award is proudly displayed in the office of the MCFSC at the Mountain Resource Center in Idyllwild.

Also during the Esperanza Fire in October of 2006, five brave firefighters from the U.S. Forest Service Engine 57 tragically lost their lives in this arson fire. One of those firefighters was Captain Mark Loutzenhiser. It was soon learned that the home that his wife and children were living in was basically falling apart. The Habitat for Humanity organization, the Woodies and individual people and groups came together and tore down the home and rebuilt it. Over $100,000 dollars was raised for the family. Companies from as far away as Orange County donated lumber, tools, and supplies to ensure that the project would be successfully completed.

In July of 2004 a wild fire started in the San Diego area then swept almost to Mexico before swinging back up to the town of Julian. Of 230 homes in Cuyamaca Woods only 17 survived the fire due to the owners having done their fire abatement. A couple of months later the Woodies, on several occasions, drove the 60 miles to cut down the devastated trees as they could fall and injure passersby’s. This work would also aid in the growth of future trees.

And in conclusion, at the beginning of my Woodies participation I met Doris, a Woodies volunteer. Shortly thereafter we married and we’ve both been happy ever after!

Photo: Marvin Spreyne (left) and Ron Perry

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