

A PART OF ME

“Like I said, every time I walk out there I learn something, I see something I didn't see before and it feels like this place just becomes more a part of me and I become more a part of it every time.”

Judith lives with her husband David on their 217 acres of land, about 190 of which are forested. Much of the property is covered by a conservation easement. Judith has a deep connection with their land based on her interests. She is a birder, a wildlife enthusiast, an avid observer of nature, a sheep farmer, and a sometime beekeeper. So when she looks at the land, she sees it as an array of habitats for its animal and plant occupants. Her husband David is a professional forester with many years of experience. It would be easy to think, given those circumstances, that he is all about growing trees and she is only interested in the animals living on the land and in the forest. While that may be true to an extent, they see things more holistically. They see their interests and goals as mutually inclusive and that their individual objectives help to create a richer landscape. However, making



JUDITH

decisions does take a lot of conversation when they're negotiating specific projects.

Judith's connection with their current ownership grows with every walk and every project. Her connection to nature and love of being outdoors was fostered in her childhood. "I grew up riding horses and spent a lot of time outside. When I was a kid, I used to go with my friends out into the woods. You know, out like playing in the streams, finding crayfish, doing all that kind of stuff." Before Judith met David, she lived in Lincoln, Vermont, and had ten acres of mostly wooded land. "It was pretty scruffy but there are some things about it that I loved, like out in the back right at the edge of my property line there were these massive beech trees, massive. I

remember at one point, one of them was used by barred owls as a nesting spot." She also talked about her past and current woodlands providing a place of respite and sense of peace. She mentioned that her work has always been people intensive. "At the end of my day, what I want to do is go someplace where there are no people. So, you know, come home, get the dogs, go for a walk out in the woods." Judith says she finds something new every time that she's out there. "A couple of years ago, I was walking out on the backside of our land and found this massive sugar maple. I mean, it was spectacular, and it felt like a coup to me because David didn't know it was there."

Judith also talked about how it was important to both her and David to foster others' connection to their land as well. They have about eight miles of trails and they encourage their community to use their property. "People walk here. They walk their dogs. They ride their horses. They snowshoe. They cross-country ski. And we've really just made it accessible for people to do that. We don't advertise it or anything like that, but the locals know. There's a group of people that we allow to hunt here every year. One family has been hunting here for a couple of generations, which is pretty awesome." She feels that it's nice for people to have access to the property and feel a connection to it. One local family has been particularly involved with the property. They are an example of the kind of relationship Judith and David want people to have with their place, and that they want to have with their neighbors. "Calvin has done a lot, like probably 75 or 80 percent of the excavation and land clearing here and all that kind of stuff. He hunts here every fall with at least one of his sons. And, you know, he

really takes an interest in the place. He caretakes it for us, in that, if he sees something that he thinks isn't right, he'll let us know. That's the kind of relationship we want people to have with this place and that we want to have with our neighbors."

When thinking about the vision for the future of the land, Judith talked about short term, medium term, and long term goals. In the short term, she is working to expand her sheep operation. In the medium term, they are both working really hard to improve wildlife habitat on the property. Two years ago, on Mother's Day, they planted about two hundred different wildlife plantings, including three or four different kinds of dogwood, beech plums, and highbush cranberries; plants that are all geared toward wildlife habitat both structurally and food-wise. "We've done early successional clearing to improve songbird habitat. We leave a lot of standing dead trees and down trees, things like that, again for bird habitat and other little creatures too." In the long term, Judith says that David is managing for high quality veneer grade timber. And they also have a lot of other interests and things that they want to do like working towards a climate resilient forest. Of course, all of their work is being guided by their management plan, which is founded on their vision and objectives. Also part of



Judith and her dog Blaze.

their long term consideration is future ownership of the land. Judith says, "We've talked about it a lot. Our kids aren't really interested in taking this on, but there are plenty of other young couples out there that would be." Ideally, she and Dave would like to see a young couple or a young family end up with it. People who had an interest in both the farming side of it and the forestry side of it. "In a few years, we will begin to work actively to find people who want to take this on."

Whether it's engaging on short, medium or long term goals, a lot of work goes into their woodlands. Judith talked about who did the work. "David does a huge amount of it. I do some of it, and Calvin does some of it too. And,

you know, we all have our own individual skills that we bring to it. I've done a lot of stone wall rebuilding on the land and things like that. Her favorite tool is her tractor which she brought to their relationship. "I've had it for a while, and it's just a great machine. You can do a lot with a tractor that you can't do easily without one." Last year, she bought an electric chainsaw for herself and loves it. "Oh my God, it's awesome. It's light, you know, it's much lighter than a gas-powered saw. And I love it. It's surprisingly powerful and I can get a lot done with that. I get a lot done in terms of clearing brush or it's useful when I'm pruning apple trees, all those kinds of things. So the chainsaw, the tractor, and, you know, standard hand tools, loppers, and such."

Judith doesn't have many concerns about being out in the woods alone. However, she does worry about accidents when working alone in the woods, whether that's her or David. "Our land goes back. As I said, it's 217 acres, and it goes way back in places where there's no cell service. So if there's an accident of any kind, you know, it's a pretty vulnerable situation." Judith says if you are working in the woods, you need to do what you can to safeguard yourself. "Like wearing the right safety equipment, like a helmet and the face protection and the chainsaw pants and all that kind of stuff." She thinks that some women are uncomfortable in the woods because they don't know what to expect. "I've been with people who are afraid of things, like a bear is going to get them. The reality is that wildlife mostly doesn't want to have anything to do with you. I don't know if for some women it's about a heightened awareness of being uncomfortable in an urban setting and then they carry that with them if they go out into the woods. I don't know."

Judith cited the slow incremental accumulation of knowledge and connectedness to the place as her biggest accomplishments. "Like I said, every time I walk out there I learn something, I see something I didn't see before and it feels like this place just becomes more a part of me and I become more a part of it every time." She says that a lot of her knowledge about the woods and trees and things like that has come through David. But she will also watch webinars and participate in programs such as those put on by Vermont Coverts or Women and Our Woods. Even just talking to woodland owners and other people has helped her increase her knowledge. Judith has extensive networks she can reach out to when she has a question or needs help, a network they will turn to when it comes to figuring out how to identify potential future owners for their land. These networks are a result of her being active in various organizations such as Vermont Woodlands Association, Vermont Coverts, Women and Our Woods, Vermont Land Trust, Vermont Sheep and Goat Association, and the Northeast Border Collie Association. "You know, David and I don't always agree on what needs to be done here, and so it's



Judith's sheep under an apple tree.

good to have enough knowledge of my own, so that I don't feel like I need to defer to him. Like the sumac out here, David was very much in favor of just kind of cutting all of that down, and I want to leave it, because the birds feed on those cones, especially in late winter."

As for challenges, Judith works full-time, is an equine massage therapist part-time, and has her sheep farm. She finds that there is just not enough time in a day to do everything she'd like to do. She finds that physical strength is becoming an issue too. "I mean, I'm pretty fit, I'm pretty strong, but I'm also 62, and my strength is not the same as it was 10 years, 20 years ago, so that is a challenge. Ten years ago I rebuilt a big section of stone wall over the course of a couple of weekends. I could not do that now, I don't think, not as easily and not without a lot of ibuprofen." But she would tell other women to just get out there and do whatever they're capable of doing. "Even if as you're getting older things sort of get ratcheted down by degrees, you can still do something. Go out walking or whatever. Just stay connected to your place."

What Judith doesn't list as a challenge, which some other women have, is paternalistic or sexist attitudes. "I wouldn't really say that I personally

have come across that. There is a difference, as I said earlier, in the way people treat me, because if they see me with David, they kind of assume that I'm an extension of him, so that can be tricky to navigate. When we're having work done here, people will automatically go to him, but I think that that has more to do with his history in the field." If she were hiring a forester though, she says she would want to work with a woman. Not because she expects paternalistic, patronizing, sexist attitudes from male foresters, though she acknowledges that can be out there. "I want to work with somebody who's going to be respectful of me and not be sort of patronizing. 'Honey, go sit down, I'll take care of this.' I don't think so, next." But because "women are underrepresented, so my inclination is always going to be to vote with my wallet where I can. And if we want more women to be involved in the woods, that would be where I would want to put my money, too."

To other women, Judith would give the following advice. "Don't rush into doing anything until you're comfortable with your place and have some idea of its cycles. It's better to take a slower, measured approach. At the same time, when you are ready, allow yourself to try things and make mistakes. Try something and if it doesn't work say, 'Oh, I would have liked in hindsight to

have done that differently', but don't beat yourself up about it. It's not the end of the world. Just be kind to yourself and try different things and see what resonates with you. Mmm, but do get rid of the introduced species." She also encourages other women to get involved. "Show up, be seen, ask questions. Assume that your presence, your questions matter. Just get out there and learn what you can, figure out what matters to you, and do it."



Sunrise over Clover Hill Tree Farm.

