

BUILDING TRADITIONS

"Your thoughts are valid; your concerns are important. You know yourself best, and your land is an extension of you."

Sam grew up on Long Island and after spending a summer in Vermont she always knew she would end up here. She and her family were skiers, so she spent much of her childhood time on the slopes in southern Vermont, but it was the Green Mountains and forests that drew her to Vermont. Sam arrived here in 2013, living first in her family's ski condo, working here and there. In 2016, she laid down her own roots, purchasing a "fixer-upper" in East Dover on 3.66 acres. Much of the appeal of this home was the contiguous 74 acres that were on the market. In 2018, Sam's family, including her mom Deidre and two siblings, set up an LLC to purchase and steward that parcel.

While the ownership of the land is shared equally in the family, Sam sees herself as its primary steward. "I do a lot of the labor on my own," says Sam. But she also works hard to keep her siblings engaged. All four owners have different worldviews and values. Sam and her mom are in constant communication, letting the other two know what it is they are doing. "So when we decided to get a forester, we had a big conference call. When we got the plan, the ten-year plan, we had a conference call with my two siblings." It is clearly important to Sam and Deidre that everyone sees this land as their



SAM

place to enjoy, a place to recreate, hike, snowshoe, ski.

Sam's stewardship is driven by her values of health and resilience. The concept of resilience is peppered throughout Sam's story. She experienced both 9-11 and later the loss of her father as a young girl. She watched as others around her struggled and although she had her struggles too, Sam was resilient. Resiliency became the "thing" that got her through. It is also her big focus on the property.

Sam's concerns with health and resilience do not end at the property boundary lines. She thinks about health and resilience, and their place in the larger community. "It's important for both the physical landscape and the community. The connection between resilient landscapes and resilient communities is huge." It's also complex. Sam understands that her actions can impact the broader community and questions how to balance both the needs of the community and the land. "How does what I do here fit into the bigger piece?" she wonders. And, when asked what it means to actually make a forest resilient, she responds, "I think it starts with the health and diversity of the forest."

Sam is still working out her vision for the future of the land because she sees so many possibilities. She imagines the property as a resilient space for both the community and the forest. She sees opportunities for art therapy, for mental health retreats, for recreation, but nothing can happen without a healthy resilient forest. Sam, like many people, needs the forest to sustain her too but doesn't want to see what she calls, extractive capitalism." This does not mean that Sam is opposed to timber harvest. The property is enrolled in Use Value Appraisal and a timber harvest is currently underway. The primary goals

of the harvest are wildlife habitat, forest diversity, and forest health.

Sam is a model for landowner engagement. She works on the property. She and her mother have spent a considerable amount of time online educating themselves about forests and forestry, as well as becoming active members in Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Wildlife. She's even spent time with their forester marking timber for harvest and inoculating ash trees. Because of this she talks knowledgeably about the different treatments that are being applied to each of their stands as well as specific trees of interest. She tracks all this information on Avenza, an offline mobile mapping software. "We have some cherry trees that I've marked, and some of my friends make bark medicine. So some of the pyramids on the map show where the cherry trees are and how to get to that point." Another way that Sam is increasing her knowledge about the property is to document changes with before-and-after pictures, which can be linked to Avenza maps.

All the land management is happening with the help of a forester. Through a series of explorations and questions, Sam ended up with a female forester. She values the relationship with her forester and feels that her questions and concerns are taken seriously. Unlike some instances she's heard about, she doesn't feel like this is an "expert and novice" relationship, that she's just expected to trust and not question. She feels that working with a female forester is a more collaborative relationship. "I got to help her make some decisions, which made me feel really involved, and that was great."

While there are a growing number of female landowners, the number of female professionals has not grown rapidly.

Sam is a young landowner and like many her age is facile with technology like the Avenza app. She is also capable of doing much of the work on her property, including cutting and splitting their harvested trees with a chainsaw and wood splitter. "I couldn't live without my wood splitter," she laughs. She's hoping to purchase a Billy Goat - not a real goat, but a brushcutter that does the work of a billy goat. Sam attended a Coverts Meet and Greet where she met other women landowners and learned about this tool. They assured her she would be able to use it. Sam and her mom, Deidre, who lives nearby, have different perspectives about working on the land. Sam feels fully capable with the right equipment; Deidre feels she no longer has the physical strength to do the heavy work. Like many women landowners, Sam and Deidre see that aging in place on your property demands that you remain physically strong or have the capacity to hire the work.

However, hiring someone brings up the issue of trust. Sam talked about the importance of finding professionals that you trust, people that share your values and care about the landscape in the same way. She finds that belonging to a woodland owners' organization like Vermont Coverts has been a big asset in finding dependable help when she needs it. "It's just asking other people at those Meet and Greets - What do you do? Who do you use?"

Sam says that you may have to advocate for what you want, even once you've found labor you can

trust. They had a situation where the logger had several canceled jobs and wanted to come and cut even though the ground was quite wet. "We specifically had in our contract that it was supposed to be a winter harvest so that the ground would be frozen. I had to say something to the logger to make it clear that I knew it wasn't dry enough. It would have been a disaster if they came up here when it was so wet. I don't think loggers are used to that. Ultimately, the logger was reasonable and was like, 'Yeah, I got it, we won't come.'" When asked what made it easy to be such a strong advocate for what they thought was right, Sam said, "I think what's different is that stewarding this land was a



Sam and her dog in the woods.

choice for our family, and it was something we knew we were going to do right.”

Being new landowners also meant that they had to manage neighbor expectations. “As soon as we bought this place, everyone was like, you better not cut anything.” Before the harvest, Sam asked their forester to send out a letter to the neighbors alerting them to the upcoming harvest, its goals and that it was in keeping with the Current Use plan. One neighbor immediately called the forester and asked if the harvest was going to affect their property.

Another neighbor had been using the property as an ATV trail and expected to continue. Sam put up signs and a trail cam. After a few interactions and a discussion about the destruction ATVs can cause, he stopped. Then, after posting the land, they got an angry letter from a neighbor saying they couldn’t just go around putting signs up in the woods. They resolved this with the help of their surveyor. Sam is not interested in keeping people out. She posts the land to control how people access the property and when, because it is very wet at times due to numerous seeps.

Being new landowners also meant they did not know the history of the property

and its past use. Sam did a lot of research at the town hall, getting out old surveys and maps. She had fun finding all the stone walls on the property. She found out that their property, like many Vermont properties, had been clear cut for sheep farming. And then the prior owner had high-graded. “He didn’t do any active management, just went through and grabbed the biggest trees, so we’re left with a lot of poor land use decisions that we’re trying to rectify.” Looking at the past abuse the land had sustained and doing a lot of research on resilience led Sam to understand how a forester could help her achieve her goals. That’s when she started looking for a local forester who could help them meet their goals of diversity, wildlife habitat, and a forest resilient to the impacts of climate change.

As far as challenges specifically related to being a woman forest landowner, Sam says, “It’s just an assumption that we can’t do it. Can’t own it, can’t manage it, can’t do the work ourselves.” Her advice to other women would be to “just do it,” whether you’re contemplating buying a piece of woodland or thinking about what actions to take. She recommends getting clear on your goals and asking lots of questions. “Your thoughts are valid; your concerns are important. You know yourself best, and your land is an extension of you.” When thinking about challenges, Deidre refers back to physical limitations that affect her ability to do some of the work. She also mentions the challenge of knowing whether or not you are doing the right thing. But, Deidre said, “Sam’s not afraid to ask questions, and I ask different questions.” At the end of the day, they hope they’ve asked enough of the right questions, and also found and vetted professionals that share their values. “And then you’ve got to just make a decision and go for

it,” Sam said. She followed that thought by pointing out that even if things didn’t work out as expected you were still going to learn something.

Though they haven’t owned their property for long Sam can point to some successes. “I think the riparian buffer is the biggest success. Absorbing and storing water is huge in Vermont.” Sam went on to tell the story of how the previous owner had mowed right down to the sides of a stream that goes through the property and how the water from Tropical Storm Irene washed a ravine into what had been a field. Sam let the white pine that wanted to seed the field grow. When storms hit in July 2023 she hiked up to the ravine to see what was happening. She found that the water was just slowly filtering, instead of rushing through, and just being absorbed. “It was magical,” she said.

There is a lot of forestry work happening on the property right now, and Sam spoke a good deal about that. However, she connects with her property in many ways. She loves discovering wild edibles in the woods. She has a camping area where she and her friends had a “campout and blessing ceremony” to bless the land before the harvest. She’d also like to have a workshop on harvesting and firing clay and other educational events. Part of the attachment to both land and people, she says, is building traditions. “A tradition that my brother and I are establishing is to walk the boundaries each year and repost the signs. I think we’re finding ways to connect with each other that we haven’t before.”

Like other landowners who have spent time on their land, Sam has places that are special to her. She goes down to the stream that runs through the

property near her house every day. “There’s just something really powerful about water. I go there every day, and it’s just like a really peaceful, meditative spot.” Sam loves the silence of the woods in general. There’s a special hemlock stand that she doesn’t get to as often. “It’s just quiet. I think it’s the hemlock.”

Sam and her family are in the early stages of their ownership journey. She, in particular, is growing her attachment and making new discoveries every day. Sam has gained a lot of knowledge in a short time but knows there is still more to be learned. So, she takes her own advice to others and learns as much as she can and then just “does it,” learning from and documenting her journey along the way.

