

PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

PENINSULA WOMAN: Olympic Park Institute program director returns home

April 3, 2011



OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK — Kristin Halberg has come home, to a place that is the same as it was back when she played in the woods — but also different:

It's now an outdoor school called the Olympic Park Institute.

As program director of the institute, Halberg is welcoming hundreds of children this spring to Lake Crescent, the stretch of Olympic National Park that shaped and inspired her through girlhood.

Halberg grew up in the lakeshore house her grandfather, Ed, built, and graduated from nearby Crescent School in 1984. It was “idyllic,” she remembers.

After high school, Halberg went to Peninsula College in Port Angeles and then to the University of Washington in Seattle, where she was a creative writing and English major.

After college, she and her dog went exploring across the West; she waited tables now and again to fund her forays.

In 1994, Halberg settled down, as it were, in a job at Pacific Northwest Cellular, the Seattle company that would become T Mobile. She worked there for about a decade, moving up through the management echelons, buying a home in North Bend — and ultimately deciding to go in a new direction.

While at T Mobile, “I grew up,” Halberg says.

Part way through, she started volunteering at the King County Crisis Line, and when she got more involved in that work her priorities shifted.

“Corporate America and the business world and my own values were diverging more and more,” she remembers.

Halberg left T Mobile six years ago, considered her options and enrolled at the Jesuit-founded Seattle University.

There, Halberg entered the executive leadership program, where she earned a master’s in business administration.

She counts among her inspirations Gail Lasparogata, director of the university’s Center for the Study of Justice in Society and a professor of business law, human rights and corporate social responsibility.

Another woman, one who is much closer, also was a major influence: her older sister, Karen Halberg-Weaver, a Maryknoll missionary who, with her husband, Jim, has worked with the poor in Peru and in Juarez, Mexico.

To the family’s relief, Karen and Jim have left Juarez and are now working at a school in Bolivia.

Halberg also has four brothers: Greg, Sean and Jim, who live in Port Angeles, and Rick, who teaches high school in Brentwood, Calif.

Last August, when her sister came home to visit, Halberg did too — and while reunited with her family, she began to wonder if there was a way she could return home for good.

Though she wasn't a regular Craigslist.com checker, she looked at the site one summer day, and found a posting for the job of program director at Olympic Park Institute. Soon after, she started the application process, though not without qualms.

"I did have moments of panic. My life has been in the Seattle area since 1994," Halberg says. Still, deep down, "it just felt right."

Things progressed quickly: Halberg got the job in September, found a place to live on Crescent — an apartment above a garage that she calls her "lake loft" — and moved into her office Oct. 4.

Among the dozens of applicants from around the country, Halberg presented an unmistakable authenticity, said Tom Sanford, Olympic Park Institute's director.

Halberg is joining the operation as it stands at the beginning of a new era, he added. The Elwha River Restoration project is under way, with the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams to be removed this fall, so students here "have a rare chance," he said, "to watch an ecosystem in recovery. That's a powerful message."

Olympic Park Institute is under the umbrella of NatureBridge, a nonprofit outdoor education operation based in San Francisco that also has three California campuses: the Headlands Institute near Marin County, the Santa Monica Mountains Institute and the Yosemite Institute.

Students come to these outdoor classrooms for a few days or a week, to be immersed in the natural world. They learn from the inside out how ecosystems work — and about their roles as caretakers.

It's clear that the job of program director here is ideal for Halberg.

At Olympic Park Institute, students experience firsthand the interdependence of life, through curriculum that emphasizes both personal growth and a sense of community. And the educators, as they herd small flocks of students through the woods, seek to nourish their kids' curiosity via inquiry-based science.

It's all about asking questions, and then relishing the process of exploration.

Halberg is a strong believer in experiential learning, and one who hopes to see the country's whole education system turn closer to this kind of curriculum — the kind that comes on a moonlit hike or a paddle out to the center of the deep, blue lake.

Halberg's favorite times are the ones when she gets to go out and mingle with the kids, whether

they're walking in the woods or peering through microscopes in the lab.

A recent topic of conversation: Cressie, the creature who may dwell beneath the lake's surface. Students sometimes see signs of the beast, perhaps a distant cousin of Nessie, the Loch Ness monster of Scotland.

Halberg herself has had some close encounters with Cressie. While a student at Crescent School, she even wrote a short story about a man who had seen and become acquainted with the creature — and the piece was so believable, she recalls, that a teacher thought it was a work of journalism, not creative writing.

“I don't know if I believe in Cressie,” she says. “But there are strange wind patterns on the lake that aren't fully explained.”

This body of water is, after all, some 13 miles long and more than 600 feet deep in spots.

“There are some pretty big things down there,” Halberg deadpans.

But Halberg must let the legends lie for much of her day. The Institute's financial health is another major aspect of her job; with an annual budget of some \$2 million and 32 staff members, she researches program “pricing models,” compiles reports for NatureBridge headquarters, and looks for ways to provide scholarships for children.

She wants to see a diverse student body, not only from the Seattle area, but also from Forks, Port Angeles and Sequim.

This fiscal year, Halberg says, the institute will serve about 4,400 children and, as always, seek contributions from individuals, foundations and companies around the nation.

More information about NatureBridge and its outdoor schools is at www.NatureBridge.org, and the Olympic Park Institute, located at 111 Barnes Point Road, can be reached at 360-928-3720.

On one recent day, two groups of sixth-graders, totaling 175 kids, came to Crescent from Hamilton International Middle School in Seattle's Wallingford neighborhood. Their “big question” for this sunny morning was “Which came first: the soil or the forest?” The kids scampered around the slushy-floored woods, as Hamilton Principal Chris Carter supervised.

The Olympic Park Institute program is set up well, he said, to give the kids a break from the haste of city life. They have time here, Carter added, get to know nature as well as one another.

In addition to these school trips, Halberg says she is also working on funding for family outings, “to serve every kind of family,” not just the affluent.

Halberg wants to give students what she has been given: a chance to walk outside and see a sky full of stars; to paddle across a smooth expanse of lake, watched over by a soaring bald eagle. Just the other night, she slipped out to listen to the waves lapping on the lakeshore.

“That kind of peace,” she says, “is hard to come by.”

Then as now, this place is more than her scenic playground; it’s akin to a spiritual guide, she says. “It was an amazing place to grow up,” and this past winter here renewed her feelings of gratitude.

NatureBridge’s experiential programs, Halberg adds, show people how their futures are knit together with the natural world.

“I’m super excited,” she says, to be part of the organization, “especially here on Lake Crescent, which is so much more to me than simply ‘home.’”

<http://www.peninsuladailynews.com/article/20110403/news/304039982/peninsula-woman-olympic-park-institute-program-director-returns-home>