

Ear to the Ground

Voices behind the 1,200-plus member groups of the Orion Grassroots Network



JENNA RINGELHEIM is executive director and sole employee of Wild Gift, which devotes itself to giving “exceptional leaders” between the ages of twenty-one and thirty “a compelling experience in deep wilderness,” and helping them launch stewardship and sustainability projects. Five years old, Wild Gift (www.wildgift.org) has a \$200,000 budget and calls Idaho’s Big Wood River watershed home.

The best thing I get to do: Spend much of the summer in the wild with an amazing and inspiring group of people.

What delights me in my daily work: Feeling like I am making a small difference in this large world.

The principle I wish I could live by: Live simply.

How I blow off steam: Climbing mountains, cross-country skiing, a cool dip in the Big Wood River.

The best thinkers in my field: Van Jones, Paul Hawken, Bill McKibben, Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams.

Another profession I’d like to attempt: Landscape architecture or local government.

The best thing anyone ever taught me: Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed

citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

The view out my office window: Sage-covered hills.

Most influential books: *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan; *Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin.

In 1995 **ALEXANDER LEE** founded Project Laundry List (www.laundrylist.org), where he is the only employee. His budget is under \$5,000; his home watershed is the Merrimack River of New Hampshire. His mission? “Trying to promote the clothesline.”

What’s changed in my organization’s work over time: The way in which people have started to pay attention to the greening of laundry.

The worst thing I have to do: Reading postcards from old women who cannot hang out their clothes in their retirement communities.

The best thing I get to do: Read postcards from people who love to hang out clothes and find it to be their Zen work.

My organization’s biggest success: The front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal* crediting us with starting a green movement, or the *New York Times* article that called us the “encyclopedia of environmental laundry information.”

What delights me in my daily work: Stories, tips, and facts from people about how they do their laundry and their memories of hanging the wash.

The worst meeting I ever had: With

Antonin Scalia to retrieve a book that I lent him. He said, “Dorothy Day was a communist.” I said, “She was more of an anarchist.” He said, “You have a point,” and showed me the door.

The principles I wish I could live by: Honesty, compassion, and respect.

How I blow off steam: Stacker, on Orbitzgames.com. It is lonely here.

The best thinkers in my field: Kathleen Norris, Bill McKibben.

How our organization walks its talk: We require board members to pledge to use a clothesline as often as possible.

Where I find hope: In my audacity.

The best thing anyone ever taught me: The world will eat you for breakfast if you don’t learn how to say no.

The sexiest person working in my field: Daryl Hannah.

Totem animal, vegetable, or mineral: Loon.

Most influential book: Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America*, or Helen and Scott Nearing’s *The Good Life*.

One event that would make a big difference: An attitude change from “me” to “us.”



PHOTOGRAPHS | JENNA RINGELHEIM COURTESY CRAIG WOLFROEM; ALEXANDER LEE COURTESY RY A. MIDOON; ROBIN UNDERWOOD COURTESY NANCY PIERCE

ROBIN UNDERWOOD is director of the South Carolina Conservation Credit Exchange (www.conservesc.com), founded in late 2007 in the Catawba River drainage. With a budget of \$5,000, Underwood connects landowners who have earned tax credits for donating conservation easements, but can't use them, with buyers who can and who will pay landowners for them.

The best thing I get to do: Find cash for farmers who have made generous gifts of their private property for this and future generations.

My organization's biggest success: Ironing out bureaucratic processes in the Department of Revenue to develop a viable market of exchange where everyone wins.

The worst meeting I ever had: With an executive director of a land conservation organization who said our work had nothing to do with food and farmers.

The principle I wish I could live by: May all my words and actions be aligned with higher consciousness.

How I blow off steam: Yoga, and reading inspiring essays.

The best thinker in my field: Peter Forbes, director of the Center for Whole Communities.

The best thing anyone ever taught me is: Hegel: "To be independent of public opinion is the first formal condition of achieving anything great." (I'm still working on it!)

The view out my office window: Trees, with a birdhouse below. An angel filters the sunlight through the window. She is made from the stained glass window of a church where my father ministered before he died.

One thing I learned working here that surprised me: The diversity of realities we all create.

Totem animal, vegetable, or mineral: Owl. A barred owl visits during the daytime. Sometimes he is harassed by blackbirds much smaller than he, sometimes he swoops down and scarfs up a field mouse.

Most influential book: I cannot begin to narrow down all the powerful books that have led me here.



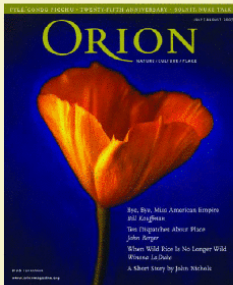
Most likely place to find me when I'm not at work: In a handstand at yoga class, on a walk through the park, or on a skateboard with skinned knees trying to look cool to eight- and eleven-year-old sons.

One event that would make a big difference: A broader understanding of money as neutral currency, not as an object of worship nor disdain.

The Orion Grassroots Network provides services to grassroots organizations engaged in ecological, social, and cultural change. For more information visit www.orionsociety.org/ogn.

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