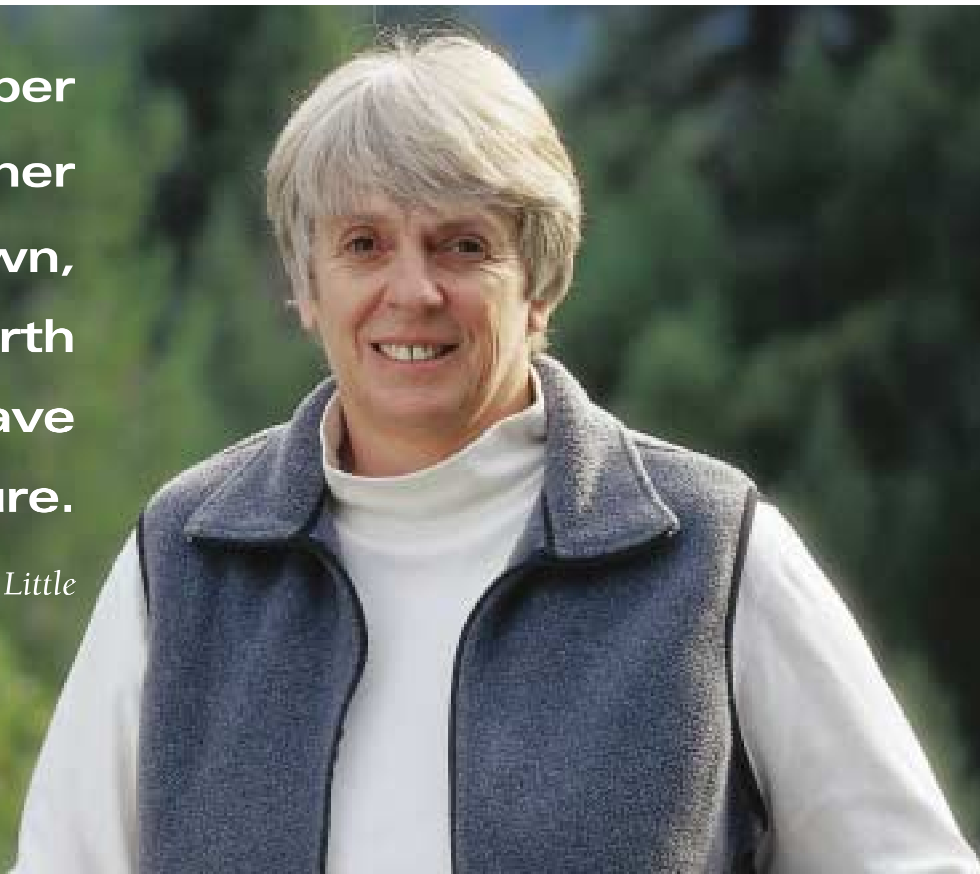
Out of The Woods



When timber wars ravaged her tiny hometown, Lynn Jungwirth set out to save its future.

by Jane Braxton Little

Jack Hopkins, www.hopkinsportraits.com

Lynn Jungwirth believes that timber towns will survive if they create economic systems that reward local workers for taking care of the forest.

WHEN THE WESTERN TIMBER WARS hit Hayfork, California, being an "ordinary" activist suddenly wasn't enough for Lynn Jungwirth. Somebody had to rescue her town.

Raising her two children, organizing a clothing exchange, and remodeling a one-room community center—these, for Jungwirth, had been fulfilling endeavors. That is, until the battle over national forest lands sacked Hayfork, 220 miles north of Sacramento. While environmentalists and the timber industry fought over the spotted owl and cutting limits, neither camp cared about the toll on small towns like Hayfork: lumber mills closed, loggers lost their jobs, and the community of 2,315 residents began unraveling in cycles of unemployment and business failures, arguments, alcohol, and abuse.

The hour that changed Jungwirth's life was one she spent with the Hayfork High School Class of '93 just before their graduation. Instead of brash teenagers hell-bent to escape, Jungwirth faced wide-eyed fear. The boys especially looked at their futures and saw nothing: no work in the woods or at the mill, no retail jobs, no hope. They were victims of the timber wars.

"The SOBs of industry and the SOBs of the environmental movement had shot bullets in their wars that passed through the bodies of these kids. I just couldn't walk away from that," Jungwirth says. She rolled up the sleeves of her trademark gray sweatshirt and began organizing.

TODAY JUNGWIRTH is executive director of the Hayfork Watershed Research and Training Center, a nonprofit corporation promoting healthy communities through healthy forests. The center, which Jungwirth established in 1993, has not halted Hayfork's decline, but the million dollars it pumps annually into the local economy has helped stave off collapse. It has created programs to retrain woods workers, developed a market for small logs that were previously considered junk, and launched a business incubator to help small companies get started.

In a hodgepodge of work stations assembled in an abandoned variety store, the Watershed Center employs twenty people most of the year. On an early spring morning, Lynn chats with co-workers about a conservation program for local kids, training for forest contractors, and a project studying native plants sold as medicinals. A pair of crusty logging boots hangs on a hook over her desk, where her grandmother's porcelain apple-blossom teacup adds grace to the clutter of phone messages, books, and government documents.

To save her tiny timber town, Jungwirth has traveled from this base in northwestern California to Washington, D.C., where a pitched battle still rages between environmentalists and the timber industry. There her goal is to convince federal agencies and elected officials that rural communities are part of the solution to the forest management impasse. In a conflict between forces from other places, she speaks for people whose lives and livelihoods are rooted in the woods.

Jungwirth may not have conquered Capitol Hill, but she has gotten the attention of policy makers. When she walks into their button-down world wearing boots, jeans, and a white turtleneck under her sweatshirt, she makes them feel connected to what happens on the ground, says Kira Finkler, counsel to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "She embodies community-based forestry. She puts a face to a component of forest policy never before involved," Finkler says.

Such kudos make the fifty-three-year-old Jungwirth squirm. All she ever wanted, she says, is to live in a community where people take care of themselves, their families, and the land around them—because it is the right thing to do. "I care about the environment, but a lot of people do that," she says. "Not many people care about decent working people and their communities."

JUNGWIRTH GREW UP in a small logging town in Oregon, where her father worked as a custom planer before all three sawmills closed and he lost his job. She married and moved to Hayfork, where her husband's family has been logging for three generations. Conflicts over the use of national forests began hitting Hayfork in the mid 1980s. Seventy-five percent of the land in the surrounding Trinity County is federally owned.

She had been working with other Hayfork women to create a community center for the public health nurse and other social service providers, whose caseloads were skyrocketing with the timber recession. Together they developed a domestic violence hotline, created food banks, and started a children's health program. But Jungwirth realized that their efforts were simply making poverty tolerable. What they needed to learn, she says, was how to nurture economic development.

Jungwirth raised some money, leased a vacant storefront on Hayfork's main street, and opened the Watershed Center. She convinced federal officials to apply funding for retraining out-of-work loggers to courses in ecosystem management. Then she developed on-the-job programs in wildlife surveys, erosion control, and stream restoration, all offered through the center. She attracted Ph.D.'s from Berkeley to teach college courses in geographic information and global positioning systems. They also tracked the social and economic health of communities in Trinity County, which helped illustrate the plight of rural towns to policy makers.

When around forty newly trained people got jobs that lasted only a few months, Jungwirth worked with the U.S. Forest Service to create long-term jobs within commuting distance of Hayfork. Local workers began harvesting small-diameter Douglas firs in a project that reduced the risk of wildfire and produced raw material, which they milled into specialty lumber. When these crews realized their equipment was too destructive, they designed and built low-impact machines.

Although she says she hates conflict, Jungwirth continually enters the fray to fight for rural communities. When the Forest Service offered $8.75 an hour to workers during a training program, she insisted on "real wages" at $10.29 an hour. She won by convincing agency officials that the local workforce is crucial to their long-term management strategy and deserves to be paid decently for its contributions.

In Washington, Jungwirth's overall effect has been to expand the dialogue and legislative response from traditional areas of conflict—clearcutting and roadless areas—to who participates in decisions and who does the work on the ground, says Greg Aplet, a forest ecologist with The Wilderness Society. "She comes with this commitment to communities and workers that everyone feels. People may not agree with her, but they almost always admit that what she says makes sense," Aplet says.

What makes her powerful at both ends of the spectrum is her heartfelt voice. Jungwirth articulates her town's story with compelling honesty, consistency, and yet a recognition that priorities for public land are changing.

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