

Citizen Spotlight on Kim Erion of LKE Corporation

At a very young age, Kim Erion often travelled with her family through the Columbia River Gorge, and became absolutely smitten with its every extreme. Kim and her husband (and business partner), Jim, have now lived near the Mt. Hood National Forest on the edge of Green Mountain together for almost eighteen years and enjoy the view out their window to Oregon's Crown Point. Her roots run deep here — where she was born and raised — and her love and respect for the land shines through in their company's watershed restoration work.

Kim and her husband both started out as self-employed entrepreneurs. Jim went into farming and construction, building subdivisions. He also completed early restoration work on Mount St. Helens following the 1980 eruption. Kim went to college and ran a tailoring business, but since starting their own company, LKE Corporation, tailoring has turned into more of a hobby.

In the beginning the two pieced together a sole proprietorship in construction. Kim did the bookkeeping and went out on parts runs. In 1993, they incorporated: "We did driveways, streets and subdivisions, and we subcontracted with large companies on major highway projects. But everything was build, build, build, cut, cut, cut, steal, steal, and cheat, cheat, cheat. It was a full time job filing liens against dishonest developers and general contractors."

They decided to bid on a road decommissioning job, where she discovered her passion for repairing the land: she was walking along replanting rhododendrons and ferns into the middle of the restored road. It was not required by the contract, but she said it just felt right. On their early projects, Jim usually operated the bulldozer and excavator, but when he left to remove a culvert a few miles away she hopped on the excavator and found instant bliss! She truly enjoyed the feeling of healing the land.

Kim has learned much about taking roads apart. "You have to know how trees fall, be aware of the dangers, be respectful to Mother Nature, and most of all, be humble! You have to know that machines can do good or harm. You have to be able to read the woods and know which snag might help the stream and which one should house a vole or osprey."

Restoration work takes her, her husband and daughter, and their extended crew throughout California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and South Dakota, carrying out challenging restoration contracts with many different agencies. After restoring much of their own land, they started completing jobs for the state, county and federal government in 1996. "We love the travel; the diversity of the contracts and agencies, the local work forces... mostly it is just being together as a family, the rush of bidding a new area, and the challenge of planning innovative techniques that leave our customers pleased with an extraordinary job." Typically, Jim and the crew complete the first phases of projects: removing large fills, culverts and bridges. Kim then stays behind to complete the final landscape re-contour, "naturalize the engineered plan," inspect the final job, and take photos. She often works alone while the crew works different areas. But working alone, camping for days, hours from the nearest gas station, is nirvana to Kim since she enjoys being out of the fast lane.

She recalls one incident while working alone one day on a grizzly bear habitat restoration project near the Canadian border. "Jim and the crew were at least three miles away. I finished up a full recontour with the excavator, shut the machine down and started walking down the road back to base camp about a mile away. Suddenly I heard a crash above me! A bear dropped down onto the road right in front of me and grunted loudly. I could feel his breath on my face! Instantly, I threw my arms up, holding my hard hat and lunch cooler into the air, and grunted back equally as loud! He grunted twice and dropped off the road out of sight." The bear didn't smell bad, she recalls, and it didn't seem aggressive. She walked calmly back to camp and sat for a moment, then realized that she had wet her pants. "I cried for about a minute, and then realized what a gift I was given: first, not to be eaten, but second, to look into its eyes and feel its breath on my face. It's a smell I will never forget and a moment that builds character into who I am each day!"

Kim has lost count of the miles of full road recontours that she has done, but estimates it's in the hundreds all over Oregon, Washington and Idaho. "Pretty darn close to a thousand miles of roads, and thousands of acres of wetlands also," she humbly admits.

Kim and her husband work with other conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited, Fish First and Oregon Trout. They are active in multiple chapters, attend state fundraisers and put much of their business profit back into conservation. Jim has been involved with Ducks Unlimited for more than 20 years, ever since he grew up under the Pacific Flyway, directly witnessing the diminishing flocks of ducks and geese as well as the decline in salmon in the Columbia and Lewis Rivers.

It is difficult for Kim to answer what her most successful restoration project is because all the jobs they do are precious. She has worked with many amazing scientists and specialists over the years and her intensity and dedication for the work has not changed. But she does recall a few memorable locations along the Olympic, Yosemite and Gifford Pinchot National Forests.

Even with the economic crisis, LKE Corporation is busy now and plans to be into the future. They have hired more workers this year than ever before and the growing interest in restoration work has allowed Kim to choose quality people who are as deeply passionate as her to do the right thing on the ground. She loves her work and is grateful her family can be together every day on the job. "Our daughter, now 16, grew up learning not to waste anything, to utilize each resource, to repair and reconstruct with respect, to appreciate everything and be thankful. Restoration has been our way of life."



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