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Volunteering in Paradise
by Susan Vitek

Tucked away in their own part of paradise, Friends of the Forest volunteers Noreen and Jan Lisowski are very comfortable in their new life of giving back to the community. Three arched living room windows frame fabulous views of Lee Mountain and Courthouse Butte, adding to the drama of mocha and charcoal colored walls.

Their high tech kitchen, opened up to make one large living, dining and cooking area after they bought their home in the Village of Oak Creek, proves that Noreen and Jan love to cook. But what about volunteering?

"I knew I would do some kind of volunteer work after we retired here, but I didn't know what," said Noreen, wearing a turquoise shirt and a pair of her signature large earrings-part of a collection of 100 pairs!

The couple found out about Friends of the Forest while visiting V-V, a petroglyph and solar calendar site three miles southeast of Exit 298 on Forest Road 618. FOF volunteer docent Chuck Jenkins wove his magic describing the Native American art work, and so began the Lisowski's adventure in volunteering.

Noreen recently took over chairmanship of the Hospitality Committee, making sure that all members who come to meetings go home satisfied--not only with hearing all the news and catching up with friends-but with tasting a special sumptuous treat.

Some of the recipes are from two cookbooks produced with the cooperation of volunteers in Friends of the Forest and the Arizona National History Association. Noreen played a big part in making those cookbooks a success.

Visitor Information is another committee the couple enjoys. "It's great to tell people about this area, and when they come back in to thank me for making their visit even more special, that is such a great reward," Noreen says with a huge smile.

She is also on the "ever-so-glamorous" Weed Committee. The verdant plants, trees and bushes cuddling her home with shade show that this woman also knows about how to keep plants happy and healthy.

Looking past her shoulder while seated at their large, hammered copper dining room table, I spied a framed faux leather Kokopelli hung on a wall that also looked like leather. Both projects showed Noreen's creative side. "I planned to dabble artistically in wall art, but four years of volunteering has set that aside," she said.

Husband and mega-volunteer Jan really jumped into volunteering with FOF. He won New Volunteer of the Year in 2006, and has certificates honoring him for the hours he puts in with the Visitor Information Committee and as a docent at Palatki.

Fridays finds him out on the Trail Maintenance Committee, building and maintaining new trails while sweating along side many of his new friends and some of his neighbors who are also volunteers with FOF. Traveling by truck to Fossil Creek, Jan picks up trash left by sloppy campers and hikers in that area, and he recently became Assistant Treasurer of FOF.

When the forest was very dry, Jan drove around to popular dispersed camping areas to warn people of the very real danger of fire on the Coconino. Then he helped schedule all volunteers stationed at various roads to keep tourists and locals who didn't own homes on those roads off the forest. If the worst happened, there was no safe way to evacuate those at risk.

When Jan is a docent at the Palatki Native American Heritage Site on Forest Road 795, he hikes holding a wonderful walking stick made especially for him by another FOF volunteer. Some of Jan's favorite things-like a hat he always wears when in New Orleans, decorate the stick, just like the rock art he stands near "decorates" the red rocks.

Asked if he has a favorite story from working at the Red Rock Ranger Station Visitor Center, Jan quickly responded: "One day a man called and said he was on his way to the Grand Canyon and had half an hour in Sedona so what should he do? I told him to keep on driving."

The couple loves to travel, and Noreen, speaking from her heart, said that "there is a special moment coming up Highway 179 that I see Bell Rock and I think, 'I'm home!' It's often the first rock that the tourists see, and they say, 'Oh my God.' And we are part of all of this through volunteering with Friends of the Forest."

If you are interested in making a difference, become involved with Friends of the Forest. For more information, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.

Susan Vitek, secretary of Friends of the Forest, is also on its Publicity Committee.