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VOLUNTEERS EXCHANGE INFO FOR SMILES
By Larry Frei

A volunteer gazes out over the scenic view terrace at the Red Rock Ranger District Visitor Information Center. There is a young couple with their dog attempting to take a photo of themselves against the beautiful forest panorama that lies beyond. The man holds his digital camera at arm's length straining to increase the distance between his family and the camera. Getting the dog in the picture is hopeless. It is a common sight.

Being free at the moment, the volunteer walks briskly around the counter and out the glass doors onto the terrace. "Would you like me to take a photo of all of you?" she asks.

"Oh would you? That would be so great," says the young woman.

The volunteer carefully takes the camera. She skillfully frames the couple in the view finder with Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte in the background. She makes sure to include the dog. "Click"

The couple reviews the photo in the digital monitor with wide smiles and many sincere thanks.

The volunteer returns their smiles and walks back to her post in the Visitor Center. The experience is always worth the walk.

It is their first visit to Sedona; so the couple heads into the building to get some information about the area. They are delighted to see their new friend again. Only now she is behind the counter ready to field their questions.

Since opening at the north end of VOC on Hwy 179 in May of 2008, the Forest Service Visitor Information Center has served nearly 200,000 visitors, and daily numbers continue to increase. Staffed by trained volunteers from the Friends of the Forest, Chamber of Commerce and Arizona Natural History Association the center focuses on helping people make their time in this beautiful area as positive as it can possibly be.

Volunteers offer information on everything from luxury hotels to camping, gourmet restaurants to picnic tables and galleries to trails. Knowledge of local laws, forest stewardship and safety are also stressed.

The volunteers do all this because they enjoy sharing Sedona with others, promoting the local economy, and most of all, they enjoy the smiles they receive from grateful visitors.

The Visitor Information building was erected on forest land with the proceeds from the sale of the old Brewer Road ranger facility in Uptown, and it is a wonderful venue for local people as well as visitors.

In addition to an unobstructed view extending from Wild Horse Mesa all the way to Wilson Mountain, the building encompasses 1,400 sq ft of exhibit space. It features a geological display illustrating the stratigraphy of the Verde Valley and Grand Canyon with rock samples from each layer. Gallery quality photographs of the area adorn the walls. There is an area devoted to hiking and forest safety including advice and equipment examples with which every local hiker should be familiar. Seasonal displays are rotated throughout the year, and there is even a glass case of wild animal scat, tracks and the culprits that left them. How good does it get?

The exhibit hall is also the home of the Arizona Natural History Association gift shop. The shop features constructive gifts for all ages, visitors and locals alike. The extensive inventory includes forest related clothing, jewelry, Smokey Bear paraphernalia, local art, walking sticks, and much more. There are books in every category from A for archaeology to Z for zoology. G for geology and H for hiking are also on the shelf. There is all of this and no sales tax. That is as good as it gets.

If you haven't made over to the Red Rock Ranger District Visitor Information Center, drop by. It is a beautiful eye opener. Enjoy the exhibits and view. Visit the gift shop, and share a word with the volunteers. Once you see why they are there and why they stay, you may want to become part of the team. You will certainly learn a great deal about the area, and you will never tire of the visitors' smiles.

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.

Larry Frei is a Friends of the Forest member who frequently volunteers at the Red Rock Ranger District Visitor Center, located just south of the Village of Oak Creek.