

Feeling the Power at WTREX

Wakefield, VA
March 28-April 8, 2022

By Lenya Quinn-Davidson

I left this year's Women-in-Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) excited about a lot of things, but I didn't think a ski trip would be on the list. If you know me, you know I don't like snow sports. They're cold and uncomfortable, elitist, and require so many extra layers of clothes. My favorite sports involve warm water and bikinis—not long underwear and knit hats that smash my curls. But that's the thing about WTREX: you find yourself stretching your boundaries, questioning the things you think you know about yourself. It's an inevitable outcome when you're surrounded by dozens of inspiring people with different perspectives and backgrounds.

This long-awaited WTREX brought 35 people to rural southeastern Virginia from Canada, Scotland, Spain, South Africa and 14 different U.S. states. The event was originally planned for late March 2020, and we postponed it twice because of COVID. To say it was highly anticipated would be an understatement; many of us had been communicating and meeting virtually for years since the first canceled event, and to be together in the flesh was unreal. I was not the only one who had to force myself to bed each night, always well after midnight, because the temptation to hang out and visit was so strong.

At WTREX, as with most Training Exchanges, prescribed fire is only one piece of a much larger training and community-building puzzle. We burn as much as we can, but we also integrate a wide variety of workshops, trainings and special guests into the mix. This year we had a visit from Jen Morris, the CEO of The Nature Conservancy; we had a two-night visit from Jaelith Hall-Rivera, the deputy chief of state and private forestry for the USDA Forest Service; and we put a drip torch in the hands of Matt Wells, the new director of the Virginia Department of Conservation. We also had an oyster bake with three bushels of local oysters and a huge box of crab, multiple tornado warnings that had us divvying up bathroom stalls for shelter, and a variety of local food trucks to cater our dinners. I'd say we struck a nice balance of local, national and international flavors.

On the night of our oyster bake, one of my favorite people pulled up to the campfire: Maria Estrada, a consultant from Salt Lake City who leads diversity, equity, inclusion and justice workshops for various groups around the country. Maria has

been part of our WTREX team since 2019, and she brings a magic with her that leaves me floored every time. If you're like me, you might be eternally overdue for your agency's harassment or other trainings—the ones that are the same every year, and at best are cheesy, and at worst leave you feeling guilty or shamed. Maria's workshops are the opposite of this: she has a knack for opening doors that you didn't even know existed. With her empathy and her vulnerability, Maria creates a space for reflection and growth. I have watched her enchant all kinds of people, from the crustiest old fire dogs to the most woke young people in the room. She leads with her heart, and everyone can tell.

The morning after the oyster bake, we sat on the back deck talking about power dynamics with Maria. Now I have to say, I think about power a lot in my work—a keyword search for my career would start with "empower"—but I can't say I'd ever mapped my own power signature. Maria shared her personal story: her experience as an immigrant from Colombia, her own biases and prejudices, her journey to who she is today. She stood in front of us and mapped out her power: the things that have given her power over time, and the things that have brought her down. Then she asked us to do the same.

The beautiful thing about this exercise is that we are all complicated. We all have power—what Maria calls the



Left: WTREX burns focused on restoration of longleaf pine and red cockaded woodpecker habitat. *Right:* Jenn Fawcett and Lacey England check out the fire adaptations of a young longleaf pine.

© Lenya Quinn-Davidson



Left: Alicia Rhodenizer trains Virginia's new Department of Conservation director, Matt Wells, how to use a drip torch. He loved it!
Right: Alicia and Lenya out on the fireline at WTREX.

© Lenya Quinn-Davidson

“power up”—but we all have power downs, too. Some of us walk through this world with very basic, almost invisible powers: being white, being straight, having financial security and good health. These are things that give us an advantage in this world, whether they are earned or not. But all of us also have some power downs: maybe poverty, insecurity, gender, sexuality, family history, lack of education. What I like most about this exercise is that there is no wrong way to be; it doesn't matter what your power signature looks like—it's about how you use it. If you lean toward the powerful, don't feel ashamed—but make sure you're using your power to do the right thing: my dear friend Jeremy Bailey says he feels most powerful when he's giving his power away. And this goes for organizations as well as individuals.

And here's where the ski trip comes in: One night at WTREX, I was up late chatting with Alicia Rhodenizer, a crew lead with the British Columbia Wildfire Services based out of Lillooet. She mentioned her love of backcountry skiing, and I immediately froze up. I told her how I hate snow sports—they're just not my thing. She pressed me on it, and I told her how the first time I went skiing was when I was 14, right after my dad died. We were rural kids without a lot of money. Our family friends took me and my sister to the ski park a few hours away, and I wore jeans and a funky old jacket, and I felt so stupid. I went several times after that, but I always felt under-dressed, under-skilled, under-resourced. Even now, the thought of going to a ski park just makes me feel so small—so powered down. Bikinis and rivers: those were free and close, and I was always a good swimmer. Those were, and still are, my power up.

A couple days later, out on a burn, I watched Alicia lead one of our WTREX crews. She has this way about her—this huge smile, these beaming eyes, this wild combination of command presence and loving warmth. Her leadership style is so different from what we're used to in fire, and yet so effective. As I watched her work the fireline, I had this sudden

urge to ski with her—to learn to ski *from* her. Alicia is the kind of person, the kind of leader, who I would follow anywhere. I don't just want to work with her—I want to overcome things with her, including my own baggage around snow sports. I would totally put on long underwear and smash my curls to hang out with Alicia.

And this is the beauty of WTREX: in the fire environment, which tends to be so homogenous, we use WTREX to lay out this menu of leadership styles and ways of being. We introduce people to Maria, to Jeremy, to Alicia—and each approach and style resonates in its own way. When we leave WTREX, we understand ourselves better than we did before, and we also understand the kinds of leadership that might improve us as people, as fire practitioners. We know it takes all types.

I recently heard a quote that said “every weakness is a strength misused.” It had me thinking about my own power signature, and about what it means to empower other people. Empowerment is not just about giving people tools or training or inspiration—it's about helping them understand where their powers lie, and how they can use them to best effect change. As Maria shared with us, even powerlessness can sometimes be a strength, because it means you have nothing to lose. Some of the most impactful work starts right there.

In my case, I'm tired of snow sports making me feel small—I think I might head to Lillooet to turn my weakness into a strength. What about you?

For more about WTREX, contact:

Lenya Quinn-Davidson

lquinndavidson@ucanr.edu

This essay was first published in the blog of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net) on April 21, 2022. To subscribe to the blog, visit <https://fireadaptednetwork.org/blog/>.

Women-in-Fire Training Exchanges are part of the *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT) cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

An equal opportunity provider