WEAVING IS LIKE LIFE: A Conversation with Phil and Amy

Three years ago, we invested in some looms and lessons to introduce weaving as a part of our winter programming. “What does gardens crew do in the winter?” is a question I had been asked repeatedly. Until the last few years, I had a good answer (sewing, quilting, baking, snow shoveling, helping with sugaring) but not an exciting one.

After three years of gathering information, skills, and looms, this winter, weaving has taken off! We have been intentional about what projects we are doing, how we want to set them up, and how we will utilize what we make. We have made exquisite wool and chenille scarves to sell at market, woven pillowcases that decorate the living room, created wall hangings that make the Ranch even more beautiful and even made rugs out of recycled t-shirts for the houses and to sell. If you live locally and want to see these exceptional projects, come visit our booth at the Rutland farmers market.

Gardens crew members like Phil and Amy, as well as a number of other staff and residents have been instrumental in the success of the weaving. Seeing people be creative as they learn a new skill and translate it into a beautiful project is inspiring! As long as the interest is there, anyone can take part in the process, which makes it a great addition to the work program. Trying something new, learning from each other, taking pride in something you make, thinking about how you want to improve it next time… these are the experiences that make a good program into a great one!

Instead of sitting down and writing about how weaving is like life, I thought I’d check in with Phil (our weaving intern) and Amy (a loyal Gardens crew member) to ask them about how weaving is like life.

Lisa: What are some of the weaving projects you’ve done at the Ranch?

Phil: My first intro was last winter. I found it really interesting, the possibilities inherent in the weaving, the things you could make, the patterns you could create. I also enjoyed the idea of creating something that didn’t exist, of taking a material and making something completely new.

Lisa [Jumping right into it]: In what ways is weaving a metaphor for life?

Amy: A metaphor for life? You take two things – the warp and the weft – [editor’s note: the “warp” is the strings on the loom that move up and down and the “weft” is the material you pass through those strings] and you create something else, something out of nothing.

Phil: We take really basic elements, like cut-up t-shirts, and use them to create an interesting and unique product, like a rag rug.

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I had been in and out of hospitals since 1996, and my mom had been looking for places for me to stay. Spring Lake Ranch was the chosen place. In August 2001, I arrived at Spring Lake Ranch. At the time, I wasn't really aware of where I was or even if I was in the state of Vermont. I was, needless to say, pretty out of it. One of the first people I met at the Ranch was long-time staff member Doug Patton. Doug had become part of my team and was an advisor to me. I stayed for some months, worked in the work program and started to become more aware. I had been working on the gardens crew and then met Lisa Gardner, the leader of the crew and another one of my advisors. I really began to like the weeding in the spring and summer and quilting and sewing in the fall and winter. The crew also had a kitchen crew to help out the kitchen with preparing the lunch for the staff and residents, about 50 people. I really enjoyed the kitchen so much that Barb, the head cook, offered me a kitchen assistant position. That job was one of the ways that the Ranch has changed my life for the better. I hadn't worked in two or three years and very much appreciated some fun work that also paid me money.

In December 2002, my team and I had finally talked of me moving on to the Rutland Aftercare Program and getting my own apartment. Good things had really begun to happen to me! My mom and I had talked about buying a house in Rutland for me to live in since it would be a better investment. We eventually did buy a house but the plan was to stay in an apartment for six months as a trial plan since I had never lived on my own. I passed all tests, and in June, I had moved into my very own house. Following that, I bought a car and got a new gym membership at a local club. I'm an avid tennis player, having played number one singles for my high school team and played on my college team. Since I had not been exercising all that much, I really needed to start
Sandy is living and working in the Rutland community and was recently invited to join the fundraising committee to reconstruct the Ranch tennis court and recreation facility. Playing tennis again and get active. These were other ways that changed my life for the better.

Finally, with the club membership and playing in tennis clinics and all-year leagues, I started to get to know some people who were outside the Ranch community. I was now getting into the Rutland community. Ever since then, I've been engaged in activities with my new friends, going to the movies, out to dinner, and to parties. Not only did the gym membership help me be a part of the community, but I also decided to also volunteer at the hospital at the information desk and have been enjoying it for 10 years.

I am grateful for having the support of the Ranch and of my family, my mom more than anyone else. I have grown in so many ways. My mom comes up to Vermont to see me at least once a month from New Jersey, a four and a half hour drive, to do a girls weekend. Without her support financially and emotionally, I don't think I could really make it like I did. I can really fall back on any of the staff at the Ranch. I am privileged to say that my life has gone in a positive direction. I now feel I can be a positive influence in the lives of the residents at Spring Lake Ranch.

Eventually, the Rutland program offered me a job as a cooking class instructor, and I teach Rutland residents how to cook. These are people who either just moved into a new apartment or just want help cooking for themselves in general. Right now, thinking back, I have to commend Spring Lake Ranch and the Rutland Aftercare Program for helping me make a life for myself. In New Jersey, where I'm from, I would never have had the opportunity to be so successful and independent. I give many thanks to my mom for finding a gold mine and helping to change my life for the better.

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What brought me to SLR?

It’s been a long, slow walk getting here. I grew up on a working ranch in upstate NY. Although it was hard work, I loved the mountains, the clean air, the animals, the space, the work that kept me strong, and the sense of place that it brought me. In the summer we ran a camp, and I was thrown into the bunk-houses with the campers at the age of four, so I quickly learned how to live with others in a communal setting.

When I was 15, we moved to Florida to work in the bar business. I was working three jobs for the family and going to school. That drastic change was not healthy for me and I got into a lot of trouble that caused extensive trauma. At 18, my mother suggested I apply for school near her family’s milk farm in NY to help get my life back on track. It helped for a while.

One weekend, while driving to NH to visit a friend, I saw beautiful mountains in the distance. I told my guidance counselor to find a school for me in those mountains. Being an outdoor girl, I chose Outdoor Education and Recreation at Lyndon State College in Lyndonville, VT. I loved it there and made long-lasting friends. It still wasn’t perfect, but VT gave me a sense of place again, and I always threatened to move back.

My college program was constantly working with at-risk youth in the outdoors, teaching them how to trust again. It was very empowering. For my internship, my advisor placed me at Northeast Kingdom Youth Services, where I continued to work with troubled youth in the outdoors.

I ended up on a traveling school through Lesley College’s Audubon Expedition Institute, based in Lubec, ME, to obtain an MS in Environmental Ed. My camp days served me well, as I lived in a consen-sus community with 23 others traveling on a school bus and camping out every night. For my internship, I continued my work with at-risk youth. After graduation, I became a teacher/counselor in ME for an alternative residential HS for those who couldn’t make it in the traditional system. The Community School was very much a therapeutic community.

I landed in California, again working with traumatized teens in the outdoors and in group homes. Someone suggested I go into social work. So, I obtained my second MS. For many more years, I worked with youth teaching alcohol and drug-free activities, counseling, etc. for the County’s Human Services Department of Alcohol and Drugs until asked to become the Drug Court Coordinator. This program allowed adults to obtain treatment in lieu of incarceration for possession and/or being under the influence of controlled substances. It was amazing to watch people transform as they worked the program. I remember one client saying, “Lana, I noticed a bird for the first time in over a year because my head is finally cleared of all the drugs.”

For the last 14 years, I lived in the Princeton, NJ,
area. I worked 10 years as a Utilization Manager, reviewing with insurance companies to keep people covered while in a 24/7 acute care lock down mental health and substance abuse facility, Carrier Clinic. Although it was a great experience and I made wonderful friendships, I never felt that NJ was my home. And, coverage was so insurance driven that I didn’t feel I could help people as much as I wanted. I also really missed working directly with clients and having the opportunity over time to see them begin to flourish. I have always believed that I was put on this incredible planet to be of service, so not feeling like I was really helping anymore was taking a toll on my soul.

I realized it was time to create a more meaningful life. One night, I got online and immediately found the ad for SLR. It felt like the perfect job that allowed me to combine both of my degrees and reclaim the sense of place I felt at the ranch growing up. I applied and was hired as the Rutland Program Director as of November 3rd.

As the RPD, I am charged with supervising staff, helping to bring programming back to the RP, interacting with clients, interfacing with the Hill to smooth transitions of clients from the Hill into town, etc. My third week here, I had the opportunity to have a surprise audit from the State. Although hair-raising, it was a perfect opportunity for us to tie loose ends and think about what we really want for the RP. We just reviewed the Mission, Vision and Values statement that was created a few years ago to see if it is still what drives us and, indeed, it is. “Our Vision is full community integration for every person. We advocate continued growth and personal development, rather than stabilization alone, as the goal of participating in the RP. Whether a person is with the program for a short time or for many years, flourishing—not simply functioning—is our envisioned outcome.”

Although my days are overflowing and there are multiple challenges, my soul is full again. It feels like I’ve come home. I have a delightfully fun-loving, hard-working, and passionate team that’s committed to helping clients move forward with their lives (not that the clients always believe this when the going gets tough). They keep me on my toes and are helping me to learn all aspects of the RP. It’s truly a team effort as we guide each other. The RP team has accomplished an incredible amount since November, including getting multiple groups going again, (Focus Group, Coping Skills, Making Change, Hearing Voices, Wood Working (building doll toys for RSVP as a community service), WRAP and others. Boat building will return when hop-a-long Andy’s knee recovers. And the clients are beginning to donate art for the conference room and my office walls, so come take a look at their talents!

I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity. The SLR staff has been exceptionally warm and helpful, always asking me about housing, how it’s going, etc. Lynn Pilcher, besides being a great boss, has been incredibly generous, allowing me to stay in the Director’s house while I get to know the area and where I want to be. Vermont has, once again, proven to be my sense of place and my heart is overflowing. And, as of March, I will be an official Shrewsbury resident, having found a lovely house to call home and that also reminds me of the ranch of my upbringing. Now, my beloved 16-year-old dog will get to join me and that makes life just about perfect!
A: It gives us all the opportunity to be creative. We can choose what kind of patterns we want to do.

L: I have a metaphor! The warp is limiting in some ways, like the things in our lives that we have to deal with. And the weft is the choices you make, how you deal with those challenges.

A: And it can be challenging because you don’t know what will happen. You don’t know if the pattern is going to come out the way you expect. But that’s also the fun in starting a new project.

P: I’ve done a wool scarf and a rug. The scarf involved planning and a little bit of experimentation, and I was happy with the results. When it was finished, it gave me more ideas about future possibilities with the same or similar projects.

L: I’ve found that, too. When I’ve finished a project, instead of feeling completed, I think of all the other things I want to do with it. It gives me more ideas.

A: I think it’s cool that there’s always a project on the warping board, there’s always a project coming up, there’s always something new.

P: The previous projects inform what’s next. We’re always learning from the one before.

A: I’ve done a lot of the warping, which is an important step because it gets the project going. Some people don’t like it, but I find it relaxing and meditative. I also made a rayon chenille scarf. That was pretty fun. It was tricky getting the edges just right because you want it to be perfect.

L: It was so beautiful! And soft! And squishy!

A: You’re calling my scarf, “squishy”?

P: It IS soft and squishy.

A: It’s forever a learning process, and the materials teach us how to use them. The yarn informs you how to use it, not the other way around.

P: There’s listening involved. You don’t impose on the material – you respond to it. And adjust.

L: There’s a metaphor there.

A: You and your metaphors!

P: I want to go back to what Amy said about the process being meditative – there are aspects that are meditative and also repetitive. So the metaphor is that there are repetitions in our lives, but they add up to something. A scarf isn’t made in one throw of the shuttle. [Editor’s note: a “shuttle” is the tool that moves the weft back and forth through the warp.

A: And you take your time, too. You don’t need to rush through the process. You realize everything is a step, and every step is important.

L: Looks like I’m not the only one enjoying the weaving metaphors!

P: There are times when weaving is tedious and you need to be patient. Or sometimes things aren’t responding the way you want and you need to persevere. There are times you need to be flexible. These are qualities that you can carry into other aspects of your life. I think another interesting thing is that the work goes back into the community. There’s an actual product that gets used or seen or sold.

A: Someone might see a woven pillow and think, “where did that come from? I could do that. I could join the crew and make my own.” When you see our projects around the Ranch, you think, “I made that. I was part of that.” When we started weaving, I started looking forward to coming to crew because there was always a new and interesting project going on.

L: Thanks, guys! For the great weaving… and the great conversation!

-Risa Gardner, Gardens Crew Head
Black Bean and Corn Salad

**INGREDIENTS**
- 3 c. black beans
- 2 c. cooked corn
- 1 small red onion diced small
- 1 cup red pepper diced small
- ½ cup chopped cilantro
- ½ cup chopped parsley
- 3 cloves garlic finely chopped
- ½ cup lime juice
- ½ cup canola oil
- 2 tea. cumin
- 1 tea. salt

**DIRECTIONS**
Combine beans, corn, onion, pepper, cilantro, parsley, crushed red pepper and garlic. Mix lime juice, canola oil, cumin and salt. Add to bean mixture.

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**Strategic Planning: A Roadmap to the Future**

For most of us, day to day tasks demand our attention and consume our energies. The benefit of a strategic plan is that it helps us to take a long view—to reflect on where we are and where we want to be.

A strategic plan is a lot of work, both to develop and to implement, but the alternative to purposeful change is stagnation, or worse, having crises become the change agent. I’d much rather shape the future than react out of a lack of forethought and consideration. A strategic plan at its best brings together all parties that have an interest in the organization and its future, and harnesses this energy to shape growth and change, and bring new life and inspiration. Strategic plans need to focus on mission, consider the various factors influencing the environment, and connect today with tomorrow through planning and implementation strategies.

To my knowledge, over the years Spring Lake Ranch has had four Strategic Plans: 1997-2002; 2002-2007; 2008-2012; and our current plan, 2013-2016. Each plan has had a different focus according to the needs identified at the time and what was thought to be most important in moving the organization forward. The Spring Lake Ranch Trustees adopted our current plan in October 2013. With Ed Oechslie’s departure as Executive Director in January 2014, there was a pause in the process as the organization regained its footing, but by April 2014, all of the committees identified in the plan had chairpersons and were charged with beginning their work.

The committees as they currently stand are: Financial Stability and Sustainability; Programs for Growth and Change; IT; Continuum of Care; and Mission and Core Values. There have been varying degrees of progress made in the respective committees. I am appreciative of all of the work done to date and recognize the challenge several committees faced in tack-

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_A Grateful Mom_

_Every gift makes a difference._
_Give what you can today at www.springlakeranch.org_
The Strategic Plan continues from page 7.

Spring Lake Ranch Therapeutic Community supports and empowers people with mental health and substance abuse issues by providing opportunities to grow and thrive. Through shared experience, meaningful work and active participation in an accepting, diverse community, we help each person develop the confidence and skills to recover.

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Executive Director: Lynn J. Pilcher  Consulting Psychiatrist: Jennifer FauntLeRoy, M.D.

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I'm also aware that strategic plan committees, while overall positive and energy producing in the long run, create extra work for people usually already strapped for time. So, thank you to everyone who has invested energy and effort thus far.

Now is the right time to bring all stakeholders up to speed on the work which has been completed and to work toward an implementation strategy for Year Two. To that end, I've requested that a portion of the Spring Meeting of Trustees and Members, which is April 25th, be dedicated to this effort. More information will be distributed in February and March in preparation for the April meeting. If you are interested in attending the Spring Meeting and being part of the strategic plan process, please contact Jill Loeber at 802-775-8833, extension 14.

Year Two of the Strategic Plan begins September 1, 2015, and it is my hope that at the conclusion of Year One we will have successfully identified several key areas on which to focus, with clear strategies for implementation, which we can begin in Year Two. This will dovetail with the new fiscal year, which is important, as several of the initiatives will have financial considerations.

I encourage you to become acquainted with the Spring Lake Ranch Strategic Plan and to attend the April 25th Spring Meeting. It is important that we all have a voice in the process and contribute our ideas. This will make for the strongest, most cohesive plan, with broad support, and one which is most likely to succeed.

-Lynn J. Pilcher, Executive Director