



Right Time, Right Place, Right Training

Sky high goals and down-to-earth skills find new forestry alumnus headed in the right direction

by Bryan Bernart

Erik Vermaas didn't set out the morning of June 21st, 2014 to save a man's life. A scant week after graduating from OSU with his bachelor's degree in Forest Management, Vermaas was simply going to inspect a timber sale as part of his new job with the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL).

His forestry degree and the career it launched were already milestones for the young man who sometimes found the academic road to be a bit rocky. "College wasn't always so easy for me," Vermaas acknowledges. "I struggled here and there, until I realized that what I really needed was a goal to help me focus—something specific to work for."

The goal he set is a lofty one: to become a smokejumper, part of an elite crew of highly skilled firefighters who parachute into remote areas to combat wildfires. "I decided that every decision I made was a decision that could get me closer to that goal," he says, "and that's what got me through."

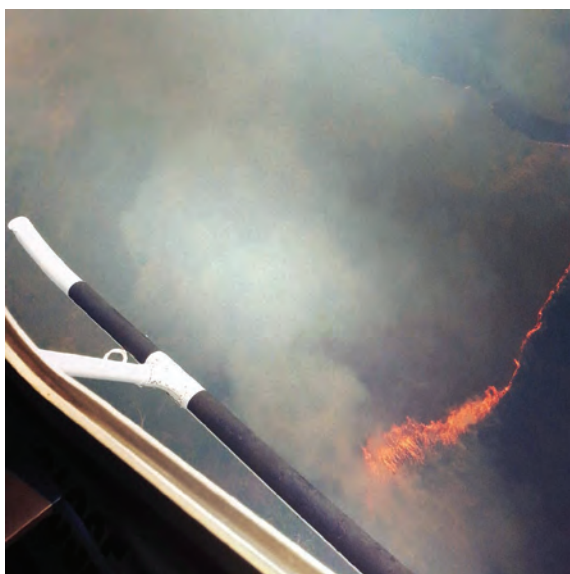
Just after graduation in June 2014, Vermaas took another step forward when he began working for the IDL. Along with his background in fire management and timber, Vermaas credits his experience working for Jeff Wimer on the OSU Student Logging Training Program with helping him obtain the position. While at OSU, Vermaas had also taught skiing racing at Crescent Valley

High School, in part because he had been looking for leadership experience. As he set out on that summer morning in 2014, little did he know that a leadership experience of a different flavor was about to find him.

Vermaas was driving through an extremely isolated but incredibly scenic part of Idaho known as the Joseph Plains, near the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area where golden hills tumble into azure creeks. By the side of the one-lane, dirt-and gravel road, he came upon a man on an ATV, who flagged him down. This immediately struck Vermaas as odd because, as he explains, the ranchers in the sparsely populated area "generally handle their own business."

Stepping out of his truck, Vermaas saw that the man was in dire need of medical assistance. He had suffered severe chemical and hot water burns due to an overheated radiator and was in a lot of pain. "He'd been out there for over an hour," Vermaas says, "and in an area this remote, there's no guarantee anyone else would have even come by that day."

Faced with the crisis, Vermaas had to move fast. In an incredible turn of fortune, he had completed a first aid course just two days prior to the incident, and knew exactly what to do. He provided immediate medical assistance and then drove the man to a hospital. While he was being



your department. This young man displayed clear thinking in an emergency situation, has displayed a clear ability to act decisively without delays, [and] has an innate understanding of others' needs in critical situations."

For someone whose career goal is a high-risk occupation, where every decision requires critical thinking under pressure, the letter is one more indication that Vermaas is well on the way toward his chosen destination.

Note: As this issue was going to press, Vermaas shared some good news: he has been offered a position as a smokejumper in Idaho and will begin training in May. He writes, "This is the career I have dreamed of, and with a little hard work, patience, commitment, and determination good things can happen. I am beyond thrilled to have this opportunity!"

Photos taken by Erik Vermaas while working on fire crews in Idaho. From left: Bingham Ridge fire in the Snake River Breaks, where he was conducting the air-to-ground communications directing SEAT aircraft retardant drops. On the Wapshilla fire in the Salmon River Breaks with the Craig Mountain Helitack Crew; Vermaas was the lead sawyer eliminating hazard trees ahead of the line dig crew, who were Canadians from the Yukon. Initial attack situation on the Camas fire as seen from the helicopter—once on the ground, Vermaas assumed the role of Incident Commander.

treated, Vermaas looked after the man's service dog, and then gave the pair a ride back home.

A short while after the experience, Vermaas had something to help him remember it: a letter of appreciation for his actions and service written to the Director of the Idaho Department of Lands. It reads, in part: "You are fortunate to have an individual of such caliber working in

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that depend on natural resources. However, due to the diversity of environments in which agroforestry may be practiced, regional and local-level knowledge and support will be needed in order to implement any global strategies.

Do you believe agroforestry could help developing nations adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change? If so, how?

Yes, I do. Beyond sequestering carbon in woody vegetation, the ability to adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change comes from the diversity of species and functions in agroforestry systems. In any given year, there's a chance that some monocultures will be wiped out as a result of abnormal climate conditions—a situation that leaves landowners with no source of income, and potentially, their soils with no cover. A system that has multiple plant and animal species is more likely to retain some economic value if one of the components fails due to extreme drought or flooding. As we've seen even recently, here in the United States, crop diversification should be a priority for developed as well as developing nations.



Atika's coffee stand (photo credit: Jeannette Krampien)

How did you spend your non-research time? What would you like to communicate about your cultural experiences in Ethiopia, a country to which relatively few in the United States travel?

My take-away from Ethiopia is that it is a really diverse country, both culturally and ecologically. I spent my time reading, grading, walking, enjoying the company of my friends Abdu and Atika, and on many coffee socials. I saw warthogs in the beautiful and cold Bale Mountains and a tornado-swarm of storks in the semi-arid Rift Valley. I'd also like to add that *kitfo* (raw beef, marinated in chili powder and clarified butter) is delicious—that alone would make a visit worthwhile.