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By Kelly Zupich  
 Executive Director, Sound Water Stewards of Island County

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I was first introduced to Sound Water Stewards (SWS) in a time of profound change in my life. I had recently stepped down from a high-powered career as a clinical pharmacist in order to find a new calling. I had been introduced to goat farming and had found solace in the rhythms that governed nature. This is something I felt I had lost throughout my adulthood and something that was unbelievably important to my soul. Along with my husband, we decided to uproot our lives after a short stint in North Carolina to chase a life that more reflected those principles back in the Pacific Northwest.



2020 Social Distanced Field Trip

We ended up pursuing our new dream on beautiful Whidbey Island. Despite having spent almost five years in Seattle prior to our departure to North Carolina, we had no contacts on the island. We soon learned we had entered a different way of life here than the fast paced city. The idea of learning more about this unique ecosystem and community through SWS training was very intriguing. I had hopes of utilizing this information to better enlighten myself on how to become a more eco friendly homesteader. This would also be an attempt to reconnect with the humming of nature I felt had fallen by the wayside in my busy career. Little did I know that this training would be the beginning of a new vision for my life and my place in protecting this piece of the planet.

the changes he saw in me, he decided to become a full fledged member as well and joined the Class of 2020.

I took on the lead facilitator role for the 2020 classes on Whidbey Island. I knew it would be a big job full of responsibility in the continuation of the same environment that had created such magic in my life the previous year. Little did I know what a task this would become with the entrance of a global pandemic put into the mix. The day before classes were to begin on Whidbey, we received word that our primary site for hosting classes would be no longer offering their shared space for fear of spreading the virus. I spent the whole day on the phone weighing options with other members of the 2020 Volunteer, Education and Training Committee (VETC). Ultimately, we came together socially distanced and remotely met with the Camano VETC group to come up with scaffolding for a virtual platform for the training. It took many hours of work of all involved but we began virtual training with socially distanced field trip opportunities in June. All the while, the guiding principle has remained for me was to ensure that this training continued to foster that unspoken magic that had captured my imagination a year ago. The platform has had it's challenges, no doubt, but the creative imagination of such an incredible team made it all possible. Throughout this challenging time in everyone's life, we brought some comfort, routine and connection into people's lives. It has been one of the greatest honors of my life to be part of this community.

Walking into that room on the first day of training in 2019, I could feel the electricity in the air. I knew I had never been in a space quite like the one I was in now. This group housed so many people with varying backgrounds and experiences. The one true tie that bonded us all was our love and respect for the majesty of nature around us. I had found my people and I fell instantly in love. I fell not only for the amazing information that was being presented but for the community this organization fostered. I gained fast friends in this group. I began to find a path I had never imagined for myself but it has felt so right. Immediately after graduating in 2019 and becoming a full fledged member of the group, I forged a path to begin sharing this message with others. Right around that time, there was an APB put out to the SWS community for help in IT matters. Knowing my husband, an accomplished IT professional, would be willing to lend a hand, I introduced him to the SWS IT group. He quickly took on a leadership role within that committee and forged great friendships as well. His involvement couldn't have come at a better time as COVID and the changes it would bring were, unbeknownst to us, on the horizon. Along with his involvement with the IT team, he became very intrigued in all of the new knowledge I had acquired and saw a change in me that made me a more well rounded individual. Intrigued by

From a lost newbie to Island County in 2018 to now taking a leadership role in one of the most challenging times of this organization's history, the impact SWS has had on my life has been profound. As we look to what our future holds, it most certainly will include so many of the lessons learned and relationships forged in this organization. We now feel as if we can have a lasting impact on the community we call home. Ultimately SWS has led us to flip the lens on our lives and to be able to find like-minded individuals who truly care about our unique cultural and geographical position in the Salish Sea. We will continue to stay educated and most importantly, share that knowledge with others in order to protect one of the most unique and special places on the planet, Whidbey and Camano Islands.



Pre-COVID Citizen Science Education Class

The magic of this place cannot be described, it has to be experienced. One of the goals of my life is to open doors that allow others to experience this magic. This goal would never have been part of my life had it not been for the amazing organization that is Sound Water Stewards.

We are still taking applications for the 2021 Volunteer Training Class! Learn more at [soundwaterstewards.org](http://soundwaterstewards.org)