Tim Keohane, Coupville resident and forest landowner, reached for a young tree to plant. “This forest should have been thinned out 15 or 20 years ago, at least once and possibly twice before now. We’ve planted 800 saplings, not counting the 100 we have here. We got the first batch in on the tenth of December. We planted 100 yesterday.”

“Leaving the forest much longer with drought conditions could perhaps have just finished them off,” Paula added. Paula grabbed a sapling and posed for a quick photo.

“Tim and Paula arrived at a decision to allow the trees to account for some tree die off, with the aim to replace a stand replacement with 20 years or so. When the Keohane’s assumed ownership, most of the fir saplings in the stand had survived into adulthood. The result, however, was not strong, healthy trunks or elongated branches. After several cycles of neglect after the initial planting, what existed was an impenetrable layer of tiny trunks and mostly needleless branches, except for a thin layer of same-size, teeny-tiny green tree tops.

As new owners of the property, Tim and Paula seized the opportunity to return the forest to good health and productivity.

“The trees were not doing what they could have and should have. The environment was... there was nothing on the ground understory, nothing. Just moss and that was it,” Tim sighed.

“Leaving the forest much longer with drought conditions could perhaps have just finished them off,” Paula added.

Paula grabbed a sapling and posed for a quick photo.

“This is tree-growin’ country! I think people who make a living in a resource or with a resource have to think: How’s it going to be in 20 years? I want to still be doing this, and how is it going to happen?” Both planters paused to place their saplings. “You have to get it straight in your own mind about what you want to do and what you can do with your forest. What do I really think and feel about my little piece of property? Our expectation was for the land to pay for itself, and to provide for a beautiful place for us to live – I think I’d do that!”

Tim diverged on a new planting path, and his sentiments mirrored those of his wife: “These trees are paying for this property... it’s an economics I think a lot of the population of America, they don’t see that. You don’t have to be rich to be able to take advantage of owning forestland.

To reach this level of understanding about their forest land management, the Keohanes spent time on the land to clarify their goals and then connected with local resources. Alluding to her family’s history in the Alaskan fishing industry, Paula shared, “Up in Alaska in 1976, I was on the local conservation district board, and I just assumed they are there to help, really. I took them at their word. That’s the first person I talked to when we bought the property on Whidbey Island in 1993.”

Conservation districts are in every county in the nation. Locally, Whidbey Island Conservation District serves landowners in natural resource management, providing technical and educational assistance. Its mission is to inspire voluntary community involvement to meet the needs of the land and the landowners – creating better ground, together.

From a forest landowner’s perspective, Paula encourages other landowners to seek the same assistance. “We talked to the conservation district first. It worked out good,” she said. “They came out, did a plan... we got it straight in our minds what we wanted to do and what we could do and then got help from a forestry consultant and we negotiated a contract with him.”

Tim and Paula arrived at a decision to commercially thin their overcrowded forest. Working with both local and state forestry agencies, and private sector forestry contractors, their intent was to bring back the health of the forest. They would do so first by selectively harvesting smaller, weaker trees, and as a result, this would improve the continued growth of the remaining trees. Second, they would replant in many areas with young saplings – a future multi-aged, multi-storied forest.

“If you look, lots of this is fertile,” Tim said, pointing to the dark earth on the forest floor. “Giving trees the chance to start, giving other native plants an opportunity to get in here and flourish, is going to broaden the environment and the habitat.”

Permits, professionals and planning are what it took to accomplish this goal. Paula cautions other forest landowners to be thoughtful when implementing any kind of land management activities.

“You don’t want to spring something like this on your neighbors... it’s just not fair. If I had stranded you with chanvans going, or that feller bumer going,” she said. “I wrote letters around, most people, after I talked to them, it’s alright. Logistics are significant. You have to do some project management, that’s for sure.”

Forestry, like agriculture or aquaculture, is a profession consisting of people whose livelihoods rely on direct connection with earth’s natural resources. Land can be for livelihood, it can be for recreation. Whether we are the consumer of a resource or the one supplying it, we have a responsibility to collaborate for the sustainability of that resource.

If you’re a landowner interested in learning more about silviculture, you’ll find it offers a complex array of forest management practices which can suit different landowners and different forests. There is a spectrum of “no-touch” to “full-touch” philosophies, and aim to strike a balance between the needs of the land and the landowner. Sometimes when we hear “timber,” our minds go to clear-cuts, but clear cutting is often a last resort for small forest landowners, and not the first option recommended for best management. “You’ll always find people who just want to grab as much as they can, but not often have I seen this in people working on their own forest,” Paula shared. “As a species, we’re not on this planet without having an impact. So, at this point, we are trying to do something that’s both going to be productive monetarily and productive as far as the health of the planet.”

Referring to the future, Tim explained further, “This is just a tiny piece of land, one or two grains of sand on the beach. We may see a benefit in five years again when the trees come back in, but the real benefit will be to the family, because they are partners in this with us, along with Paula’s sister, Gypsy, and her husband, Joe. We all are wanting to have something we can actually contribute to their family. While our goal is foremost, the long term sustainability for forest health, environmental diversity, and selective harvest, the overall goal with the property is more akin to a family aspect. It will be our intention that the property to be available for family to come and escape the pressures that gather from normal life. For us and future generations.”

A gentle breeze interrupted our conversation whilst planting. Looking up, a deeper gray in the sky suggested rain. The break in weather had passed, and our moment for reflection had ended. I was left with a sense of contentment and education, and a reminder that there were people there to help, really. I took them at their word. That’s the first person I talked to when we bought the property on Whidbey Island in 1993.”

Conservation districts are in every county in the nation. Locally, Whidbey Island Conservation District serves landowners in natural resource management, providing technical and educational assistance. Its mission is to inspire voluntary community involvement to meet the needs of the land and the landowners – creating better ground, together.

From a forest landowner’s perspective, Paula encourages other landowners to seek the same assistance. “We talked to the conservation district first. It worked out good,” she said. “They came out, did a plan… we got it straight in our minds what we wanted to do and what we could do and then got help from a forestry consultant and we negotiated a contract with him.”

Tim and Paula arrived at a decision to commercially thin their overcrowded forest. Working with both local and state forestry agencies, and private sector forestry contractors, their intent was to bring back the health of the forest. They would do so first by selectively harvesting smaller, weaker trees, and as a result, this would improve the continued growth of the remaining trees. Second, they would replant in many areas with young saplings – a future multi-aged, multi-storied forest.

“’If you look, lots of this is fertile,’” Tim said, pointing to the dark earth on the forest floor. “Giving trees the chance to start, giving other native plants an opportunity to get in here and flourish, is going to broaden the environment and the habitat.”

Permits, professionals and planning are what it took to accomplish this goal. Paula cautions other forest landowners to be thoughtful when implementing any kind of land management activities.

“You don’t want to spring something like this on your neighbors... it’s just not fair. If I had stranded you with chanvans going, or that feller bumer going,” she said. “I wrote letters around, most people, after I talked to them, it’s alright. Logistics are significant. You have to do some project management, that’s for sure.”

Forestry, like agriculture or aquaculture, is a profession consisting of people whose livelihoods rely on direct connection with earth’s natural resources. Land can be for livelihood, it can be for recreation. Whether we are the consumer of a resource or the one supplying it, we have a responsibility to collaborate for the sustainability of that resource.

If you’re a landowner interested in learning more about silviculture, you’ll find it offers a complex array of forest management practices which can suit different landowners and different forests. There is a spectrum of “no-touch” to “full-touch” philosophies, and aim to strike a balance between the needs of the land and the landowner. Sometimes when we hear “timber,” our minds go to clear-cuts, but clear cutting is often a last resort for small forest landowners, and not the first option recommended for best management. “You’ll always find people who just want to grab as much as they can, but not often have I seen this in people working on their own forest,” Paula shared. “As a species, we’re not on this planet without having an impact. So, at this point, we are trying to do something that’s both going to be productive monetarily and productive as far as the health of the planet.”

Referring to the future, Tim explained further, “This is just a tiny piece of land, one or two grains of sand on the beach. We may see a benefit in five years again when the trees come back in, but the real benefit will be to the family, because they are partners in this with us, along with Paula’s sister, Gypsy, and her husband, Joe. We all are wanting to have something we can actually contribute to their family. While our goal is foremost, the long term sustainability for forest health, environmental diversity, and selective harvest, the overall goal with the property is more akin to a family aspect. It will be our intention that the property to be available for family to come and escape the pressures that gather from normal life. For us and future generations.”

A gentle breeze interrupted our conversation whilst planting. Looking up, a deeper gray in the sky suggested rain. The break in weather had passed, and our moment for reflection had ended. I was left with a sense of contentment and education, and a reminder that there were people there to help, really. I took them at their word. That’s the first person I talked to when we bought the property on Whidbey Island in 1993.”