

MY NEW OFFICE IS A FOREST

THE RISE OF RANGER RETIREES

By KORRIN L. BISHOP



THAT DAY, EVERYTHING UNFOLDED LIKE A MYSTERY.

The twenty-mile drive on Oregon's Highway 46 East would dead-end at their new home. Their first impressions of the unfamiliar terrain were clouded by nerves and anticipation—stretches of farmland gave way to forested riverbanks, and as they drove farther, the road began a steep climb into the Siskiyou Mountains. Hairpin turns hugged deep ravines. At the end of the road, Trinh Tran, 54, and Doug Henson, 57, parked their car and were greeted by one of their new coworkers, Kat Gans, 25. They had arrived at Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve.

IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, STYX is the goddess of the river boundary between earth and the underworld—the line between life and death. At Oregon Caves, she's also the namesake of the park's underground river.

While President William Howard Taft established the park's cave as a 480-acre national monument in 1909, it wasn't until 2014 that Congress designated the River Styx as the first subterranean national wild and scenic river. With this

designation also came protection for the 4,070 acres of the river's watershed as a national preserve.

High up in the park's preserve are subalpine meadows and lily-padded lakes that burst with wildflowers and whirl with the urgency of hummingbirds' flights. Old-growth Douglas fir trees tower in the dense forest pitched across the mountainside. Below, a dark, cold hollow in the side of the rock dares visitors to enter.

Oregon Caves is home to 15,000 feet of labyrinthine passageways in what's called a "solution cave." They form when water and acid dissolve rock while passing through underground pores and fissures. The park's cave system is home to more single-cave endemics than any other cave in the western United States—meaning several of the insect species in the cave are found nowhere else in the world. It was in this dark, bug-filled underworld ominously called the River Styx that Trinh and Doug had chosen to spend their summer.

"That very first day, Kat welcomed us, took us to our room, and," Trinh pauses,

looks at Doug, and laughs, "I think I started to cry!"

"She did. Trinh did," Doug says.

OREGON CAVES WAS A long way from the desert climate of Scottsdale, Arizona where Trinh and Doug had started a family and built their careers over the past 30 years. In Scottsdale, Trinh had been doing healthcare data analytics for a pharmaceutical benefit management company, while Doug worked as a healthcare executive in physician practice management.

Doug had become increasingly disillusioned with his job. Trinh was still enjoying hers, but was working herself to the bone.

"She was doing 60 to 80 hours per week, staying up well past midnight," Doug remembers. "It was not healthy."

"I think I was averaging four hours of sleep per day."

With Trinh's permission, Doug began submitting applications for them to seasonal positions with the National Park Service. "I'd been applying because I'd made the decision that I was going to quit. I wasn't enjoying myself. I was trying

to convince Trinh that life is short and we don't know what's going to happen."

"Because I was working all the time, I was just like, sure, sure, sure, whatever," Trinh says, thinking of the time before she realized she'd have to make a decision.

Several years earlier, Trinh and Doug had taken their two children on a nearly three-week trip through Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. While walking a trail in Glacier, they came across a couple in their early sixties wearing park service uniforms. Trinh and Doug began chatting with the couple and learned that they had retired from fields unrelated to the park service, but had now been doing seasonal work as park rangers for a few years.

"I was so inspired," Trinh remembers. "I told them, 'I want to be just like you when I grow up!' It was always in the back of my mind that I wasn't going to work until I was 65. My father died at the age of 63. Doug's father died at the age of 65, and his mother died at the age of 69."

In 2010, Trinh was diagnosed with breast cancer. After undergoing surgery and radiation therapy, doctors put her on a drug called tamoxifen. The drug aims to prevent a recurrence of breast cancer, but comes with an increased risk of uterine cancer. Every year since beginning the prescription, Trinh went in for a pelvic ultrasound to make sure everything was normal. In 2016, she had just started a new position within her company around the time of her scheduled annual exam.

"I was just really, really busy," says Trinh. "My appointment came up and I couldn't make it, and then I never rescheduled."



ABOVE Doug and Trinh in their park service uniforms just outside the entrance to the cave where they spent their summer leading tours.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF Doug Henson and Trinh Tran. Dog icon by Steve Laing. Microphone icon by Yoshi



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ABOVE Doug and Trinh on a backpacking trip to Yosemite just after they finished their first season as park rangers. They often explore surrounding parks on the weekends.

When her 2017 appointment eventually came around, Trinh's exam flagged an abnormality. The dilation and curettage that followed, which removed her uterine lining for testing, fortunately showed no signs of cancer. “It came out fine,” Trinh says with relief. “But after that, I was like, really? I skipped my annual exam for a job?”

A week after getting her results back, Trinh and Doug got a call from George Herring, Chief of Interpretation at Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve. He wanted to offer them both a position as interpretive rangers for the park's upcoming summer season. Trinh and Doug agreed that the odds of them both being offered a position at the same park had been small. That reality, coupled with Trinh's processing of her recent health scare, made them decide to finally take the leap together into an adventurous early retirement.

Trinh began her resignation letter like this: “No one on their deathbed ever says, ‘I wish I had worked more.’”

“Then I explained that's why I needed more time to do what I needed to do.”

TUCKED NEAR THE CAVE'S entrance is a collection of century-old structures some might call ‘rustic.’ One of these bark-clad buildings, dubbed the Chalet, houses the park's visitor center, a few offices, and the dorm room that brought Trinh to tears.

“George said it the most diplomatically,” Doug recalls, thinking of how to describe the seasonal park staff's living quarters. “He said it really is a dorm environment with all the good and bad that conveys. On the good side, you get to know people really well and many develop lifelong friendships from those relationships. But, it can also be a challenge sharing a small space.”

Trinh wiped her eyes, and after the initial shock of the transition, she and Doug spent their first day in the park vacuuming and cleaning.

“We made it our own room.”

TRINH AND DOUG MET nearly 35 years ago when they literally bumped into each other on the Wolf River in northern Wisconsin. Both were white-water-rafting with friends.

“I'd seen her signing up for the trip,” Doug recalls. “But I didn't have the guts to talk to her. However, a short time later, she and her friends came floating by in their two rafts, and drove right into ours. I said something sarcastic like, ‘you're really trying too hard’—is that what I said?”

“Yes, that's what you said,” Trinh replies. “And I kind of rolled my eyes and under my breath said, ‘Jesus, it's going to be one of those days!’”

As the day went on, they kept bumping into each other.

Ranger Patch Icon by Mace



CAVE IN Oregon Caves offers standard discovery tours of the cave, candlelit tours, and off-trail tours. Learn more and reserve a spot for the upcoming season at nps.gov/orca



“I’d never done it before!” says Trinh. “That was my first time camping!”

Trinh moved with her family from Vietnam to Wisconsin after the war ended in 1975. She was eleven years old at the time, and while she remembers being something of a tomboy compared to her sisters, she didn’t have a very “outdoorsy” upbringing. “I don’t even remember us taking a vacation. We didn’t have the money. So, we never did.”

At some point during the day, Doug shared some of his trail mix with Trinh. “She warmed up to me when I shared my food with her. Trinh didn’t like me.”

“It’s not that I didn’t like him,” says Trinh. “It’s that it was a girls’ trip.”

The two groups ended up camping in the same spot that night. Doug made a fire and shared more food—meat, potatoes, and carrots all wrapped in foil and cooked over the blaze—with Trinh who had planned a much simpler meal: “Hot dogs and marshmallows—that’s all we brought! Not even buns!”

IN HER MOST RECENT position before retirement, Trinh was busy learning the details of the job, the department, and her responsibilities. “I remember telling my coworkers, this will



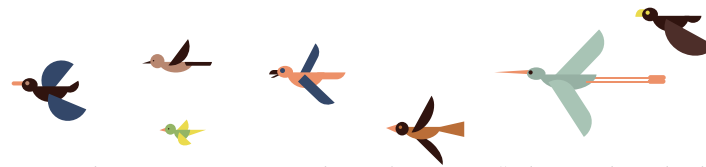
ABOVE Trinh and some of her fellow rangers join visitors to Oregon Caves in viewing the 2017 Solar Eclipse, which had about 93% coverage at that location.

be my last job. I will not learn another job. And then I retired—and had to learn another job!”

In their first season as interpretive park rangers, Trinh and Doug were responsible for connecting visitors to the park’s resources, leading cave tours, roving the trails, and conducting the occasional junior ranger swear-in. The visitors to the park ranged from having lots of caving experience and a

background in geology, to being underground for the first time.

“At first, it was challenging,” Trinh admits. “We got hired and were working with a bunch of new grads with science backgrounds. We had to learn Geology 101 in a week! In my old job, it was more of a programming position and I had to look at a computer screen 12 hours a day. As a park ranger, I had to talk to



people; so it was quite a change! But, it was a welcome one.”

Beyond their official park training, Trinh and Doug also had a chance to learn from the other seasonal rangers about much more than caving—one of those perks of tight living quarters. With many of their colleagues being the same age as their own children, Trinh and Doug affectionately, and perhaps unconsciously, refer to them as “the kids.”

“All of these kids, we learn so much from them!” Trinh exclaims. “Kat and her bread baking and worldview, Paul and his bad jokes—though, neck and neck with Brett. Ethan and all of his adventures. The stories that they tell, it’s just—wow. They’re so carefree! One even lived nine years out of a bus!”

“A bus with no bathroom!” Doug looks stricken.

“It was very different than the social circles we had in Scottsdale.”

THE STORY GOES THAT Achilles’ mother dipped him into the River Styx to give him the power of invulnerability. But, the reality is that we’re all vulnerable. **Eventually, with time, our bones get fragile, our joints begin to ache, and we’re faced with the fact that our bodies won’t last forever.** Achilles’ mother tried her best to protect her son, but even he had a weak heel.

“Part of our decision to do this at this time in our lives was due to our recognition of mortality,” Doug shares. “We’re probably not going to be on the long end of longevity.”

Trinh and Doug’s path took planning. They had to navigate concerns about income, release the ego that tries to define a person by her job status, and find ways to continue to be challenged outside of the office. But now, they get to spend their summer seasons exploring and advocating for the parks they view as true national treasures. They spend those weekends traveling to other park sites, hiking trails, as they put it, “while [their] knees still allow it.” Rather than run from them, Trinh and Doug have embraced the changes that come with age and are living life on this side of the River Styx, as best as they can, just as they want, for as long as they’re able. ☺

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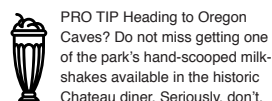


Milishake icon by Marianna Rossi



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PRO TIP Heading to Oregon Caves? Do not miss getting one of the park’s hand-scooped milkshakes available in the historic Chateau diner. Seriously, don’t.

