‘How can we make it work?’

Rangers Dennis Burnett and Ginny Rousseau: An Interview with Brenna Lissoway

Ginny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett met while working as protection rangers in Yosemite Valley and were married there in 1978. Each went on to accomplished careers in the National Park Service. Often duty stationed apart, they grappled with balancing marriage, raising their children — daughter Lindsey and son Bryant — and pursuing their individual professional goals. In an interview conducted in 2014 for the ANPR Oral History Project, Burnett and Rousseau shared how they negotiated difficult decisions, adapted, compromised and persevered — asking not if, but how, they could make their complex situation work. From delivering son Bryant in a car in a snowstorm on the General’s Highway in Sequoia National Park, to alternating as the stay-at-home “house spouse,” theirs was a partnership that strove to integrate family and career. This is their story.

BURNETT: We’d been on the Cape [Cape Cod National Seashore] for five years. Hard place to leave. There was little promotional opportunity. So, we moved.

ROUSSEAU: You moved.

BURNETT: At least three of us did (laughs).

ROUSSEAU: I rented an attic apartment in Quincy, [Massachusetts], closer to the Northeast Regional office where I worked. I would drive to Delaware Water Gap on Thursday evening after work, stay until Sunday, and drive back to Boston. It was a five-and-a-half-hour drive. I would be home for four days and Lindsey would go, “Who are you?”

One of the interesting things when I was at Albright [Training Center] and Dennis was on the Cape was the kids at school told them, “Your parents are divorced because they don’t live together.” We had a child psychologist school counselor tell us: “Keep communication open. They will be just fine as long as you talk about things.” The kids wrote me letters.
It was hard. We would get together with family for Thanksgiving, and they would say, “How can you abandon your children? How can you abandon your husband?”

BURNETT: “When are you going to get a real job?” (all laugh)

ROUSSEAU: A lot of family pressures and nobody around who understood what park rangers did anyway. But it was hard, looking back. I know I missed a lot. Would I have changed it? I don’t know because I wouldn’t be the person I am now if I hadn’t done what I needed to do. But there was certainly a price to pay.

BURNETT: But conversely, had you not taken the job, where would you be also?

ROUSSEAU: I get teary thinking about it.

BURNETT: We really did. And whether it was the right decision, wrong decision, we’ll never know. It was a decision.

LISSOWAY: What was the highlight of you both being able to stay in the Park Service?

BURNETT: The mere fact that both of us were able to continue doing what we loved doing. Yes, we sacrificed, but we didn’t sacrifice what our true passion was, which was what the Park System means. It is so important to both of us.

ROUSSEAU: I think from the very start, when we first got married, or before we got married, we both had this passion, and we didn’t give up on it. A lot of people say, “Well gee, I had to get divorced to be a superintendent.” We just said, “How can we make it work?” I’m not saying it was easy. You know, family counseling at times and yelling matches at times. Again, it was just an extension of how we’ve lived our life.

We’ve worked it together. It’s been very satisfying. I know a number of people who have made it work because they have been happy to go to other bureaus or agencies, and that’s fine. But for us, what we had to do for ourselves was be true to ourselves — our own path.

Ginny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett retired in 2007 and now live (together) in Flagstaff, Arizona, where they teach for Northern Arizona University’s Park Ranger Training Program.

Brenna Lissoway, a “park brat” and second-generation NPS employee, is the archivist for Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico.