

Ocate Cliffs Newsletters 2013-2014

This file combines newsletters from January 2013 to July 2014

2013 January 4

News on the retreat center front! We completed the purchase of 40 additional acres next to the original land. This was offered in October and took a while to work out legal anomalies. This new land also has a small cabin and at one time had a surface spring. The property owner on the other side has promised to put 2 acres of hers in her will for us, so that will bring the total to 141 acres. The benefit of getting more land now is to ensure a buffer of undeveloped land exists in a wide area around, because the remote solitude is the main selling point of the retreat center. Also the prices of land will likely increase after we develop and improve the road access, so buying now made sense. However, that purchase ate up all of what we have saved up, so the road maintenance will have to wait longer, until we earn some more money.

In other news, the county approval process for the zoning was started in May 2012 and since then we've done four presentations at official meetings. The last one was yesterday, and at that one we were given a partial sense of what the application for the zoning should contain, and were told there IS a zoning manual after all (still haven't seen it). Now we can finally work on preparing the application. This will take another couple months, because, well, because they need it to take a long time so that things don't change too fast (I doubt they have any legal grounds to require certifications from the state engineer and other hoop-jumping prior to zoning approval.)

Since there is a possibility it will not be approved, we have to defer all other activity until that happens.

After getting through yesterday's meeting it makes me wish I had a supportive community here to fall back on that understands how hard it is to act in the inauthentic world and be in the spotlight for so long. I don't think I could do it without Crystal, and still it is lonely. We need places where we can be whole, and not fighting.

And finally, we've been dreaming up more about the feel of the buildings and what the place can do for people. For example, one of the possible floorplans I have is a two story house with a balcony, and this lends itself to having a little stage and a theater feel. So this house could be called "The Theater" and while anyone could rent it, it might be especially desirable for those who want to do acting as part of their retreat. It could have some theater curtains, masks, and other dress up clothes. Other ideas: the general store can be a western saloon feel (The Rusty Nail?); a laboratory (celebrating science); a play house (celebrating play with oversized toys?); a philosopher's library; an art gallery (groups leave their own art for the next group?); a barn. Each of these would be houses with bedrooms, but would have different themes. This is just a beginning of thoughts on ways autistic leaders can do more than just what society expects as a boring baseline - we can give more of what makes us special, letting people in on our inner greatness. Maybe the experiences at this place will have a little more spark of reality to them than any old resort, that ignites something in a bigger way. Would love some ideas on this.

I hope all of you are well, and more patient than I am!

2013 April 27

To the Ocate Cliffs retreat center followers:

Here's an update on the progress with the government. We were given the zoning application requirements in January, and the most significant one was to have state permission for a wastewater system. An engineer worked on that February through early April, and then we made the complete application to the county with the engineering details. The number of guests had to drop from 100 to 70 because of the permitting requirements for waste systems.

Timing: The fifth hearing on our case is scheduled May 23rd. It is likely there will be 1 or 2 more hearings after that even if there are no objections. Consequently it is unlikely that anyone can stay on the land this summer more than a few days at a time. I said last summer that I was sure it could happen this summer, and I certainly didn't expect it to drag out this long.

Although we have met all legal requirements, we may still need help showing them that we mean well, which is difficult for me to do.

I've attached a mini flier that I will be giving to people I meet who look like they might be an ally or contributor. Feel free to do the same.

2013 July 23

Great news on the retreat center - it's been approved by the county! The application process has been a 14 month ordeal, and the county commissioners spent only a few minutes on it this morning before approving unanimously.

We spent 2 nights up on the land and met with a dowser and a well drilling company. The dowser identified some drilling sites, estimating a sufficient water flow at an affordable depth (500' or less) and the driller will be getting back to us with "numbers". The same company also does excavation and road work, so we may use them for both things.

The area has greened up although the winter was extremely dry. Some aspens didn't make it through, but many did.

While up there we sited 5 potential building sites and cut a 750' long swath of brush for the loop road. We can now stand in the park (the area surrounded by the buildings) and see where the buildings, paths and roads will be, so it is starting to feel real. It was hard to get the courage to destroy so much innocent plant life - for some reason a lot harder to kill the firs than the oak brush. The dowser identified a spot in the park that is a spiritual center, and what is interesting about this is that out of 100 acres, he zeroed in on the place that we had felt was the most special, without even having seen the site and without knowing about the proposed park layout.

We've had some gifts made to Ocate Cliffs already: One was the use of Crystal's parents 4WD Subaru, which they recently bought in part to be able to make trips to the land. The other was a hand made ceramic lamp. (And yes, Ocate Cliffs seems to be the final name for this.)

A lot that has been on hold can start opening and moving now: the marketing and web presence (T shirts? videos?), creating a non profit board, the construction of the water system, a forest thinning and fire management project, fundraising, trail building, tree house building, planting, conservation easement work, and setting up insurance, to name a few.

In addition to all that, the project needs to find ways for autistic minded people to do what they do best, whatever specialty that is. If you do some kind of creative work and it can be fit in, maybe this is the place where that can become a gift for other people coming there.

If you talk about this to people, please let them know about the original article I posted on it:
www.tinyurl.com/ocate

2013 September 8

Retreat center news!

Major accomplishments recently include clearing the road all the way to the well drilling site, and signing a contract with an excavator to repair the 2 miles of semi-public road and build a quarter mile of our driveway. I'm calling the driveway Oak Street to commemorate all the scars from fighting with the oak brush. They are starting on the road this week.

Also we got the domain name for the web site - www.ocatecliffs.org - and posted some pictures on a preliminary page there.

The main milestone I'm trying to reach now is to have a permanent water supply, so that people can be there for longer periods of time than has been possible.

People have asked me to let them know what they can do, so here is a list:

1. We need a non-profit board of directors. It is often said that board members should be influential and wealthy, but since I don't travel in those circles, I'm thinking more in terms of people who have a commitment to the kind of experiment we are doing, and intend to make some kind of contribution of time outside of board meetings, will learn something from the experience, and can participate in real time meetings by phone or text. Most of the board, but not necessarily all, should be autistic or otherwise neurodivergent. So please consider whether you are right for that, or who you know who might be.
2. Please take a look at the web site and do your social networking thing with that.
3. Is there a logo designer who wants to improve on what I came up with yesterday, or create a new one? We can start with a full color web logo and simplify it down for different media.
4. We would like T shirts made with the logo and possibly something else. We have a volunteer already to print the shirts! But what should go on it? the web site, a message of some kind?
5. We need a fundraising planner. Although we can't accept donations until we are officially a non-profit, we can start making plans for what kind of fundraising to do, find builders and other professional contributors, and grant sources. I'll be out of money after drilling the well, so this is kind of important!
6. We need someone to research how we can get paid to provide services to people with disabilities. For example, do we need to contract with someone with certain certifications to be eligible for insurance money or funds from the division of vocational rehab?

7. We need a labor pool and experienced builder for the toilet house - the first building to be built after the water supply is in. That will probably be in Spring 2014, and I envision this being a lot of fun, kind of a work camp and community building experience. Please consider if that is something you would like to do.

2013 November 2

Hello Ocate Cliffs Supporters,

This is short update on progress on the retreat center.

We have completed the road construction so that typical cars can get up the mountain. The well drilling site is marked and cleared, and we have signed a contract for drilling. That should happen in the next month, then after than we'll install the pump and water tank so that a year round water source is available. Then if all goes well, we should be able to build the toilet house in the spring.

We installed a gate on the private road to try to discourage driving around on the land and vandalizing it. We had a very large tree stolen in the summer and we understand illegal christmas tree cutting is fairly rampant in the area.

On the corporate side, we have established a board of directors, and are converting my existing company to non profit, to be called Divergent Labs, Inc. (divergentlabs.org) The company has a structure that allows it to run any number of programs, Ocate Cliffs being just one of them (ocatecliffs.org).

The board consists of:

Ian Ford (acting chair)

Crystal Western Ford (secretary)

Kjensmo Walker

David Hamilton

Stan Provencal

Jessie Bennett

Amik Nafte

The State Forestry Division has completed a forest management plan for us. It contains a ton of information about preventing fires, the different tree and wildlife species, diseases, and recommendations for buildings and human uses to co-exist with nature.

Over the winter I hope to get some fundraising activities going. Those who wish to work on that - please let me know.

Finally, I'm attaching a T shirt idea. The first round of T shirts and other marketing material should probably be focused on getting people interested in working and raising money, not on marketing the rentals. So I'm trying a very unambiguous message, which is simultaneously very simple and very radical. What do you think?

2014 January 20

Hello Ocate Cliffs Supporters:

We have made some progress since I last sent a general update in November, so here it is:

SUMMER WORK CAMP: We're planning a work camp of one or two weeks in June/July, and we're looking for people who want to come and work on construction and site work, and be in on the ground floor of this history-making project. Plus fun and games, community building and getting lost in the woods! We will have some money to support travel and food. Please think about whether you could come, and discuss with other people you know. You could even come for much longer and make it your whole summer of transformation on the mountain. Don't buy plane tickets or quit your job just yet though, because we have to settle dates with the builder. I'll send out more info as soon as I can.

WEB: Please see our web sites: (1) The recently expanded information on www.ocatecliffs.org (2) The company site at www.divergentlabs.org, and (3) our facebook page "Ocate Cliffs".

CONSTRUCTION: The well drilling was contracted in October but was then delayed due to ice and snow - the perils of building on a remote mountain, I guess. So I'm using the time in the winter to line up the builder and plan getting materials, so we can use the summer months the most efficiently.

FUNDRAISING: I've submitted one grant request to the NM Autism Society and started research into foundation grants. The major insight so far is that we need one thing more than money - ambassadors: people who are excited about it and will talk about it and make it a well known thing both on- and off-line. Thinking backwards, a larger sustaining grant (around 100k) is only realistic after we've demonstrated serious public support. Crowdfunding could show that support and be a major source of money (10-50k?), but it won't work until we have a bigger family and more social credibility. So this work camp has to be for building a family and a reputation, as much as for physical building. The work camp will cost about \$8,000 and will yield much more than that in capital value, and at the same time will unlock the next level of funding if we do it right. I hope people with more experience in fund-raising will help me out with this.

BUSINESS: On the business side, the company Divergent Labs has been created, to run this project among others. We've filed for non-profit status, which can take months or even a year to complete. In the meantime, we expect to use the NM Community Foundation as a fiscal sponsor.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: A lot of people have said "let me know what I can do" and here is the answer in a convenient list!

(1) Share and "like" our facebook page. Invite your fb-contacts to like it.

(2) Consider the work camp. If not you, think of someone you want to tell about it.

(3) Send me a note saying what Ocate Cliffs means to you, that we can use in grantwriting letters. For example you could say why you hope to participate (what it will do for you), or why it is needed generally.

(4) Provide me with leads for software and web development, because that could potentially bring in a lot more money than donations. For example if you know someone who has a job, it is likely that their employer (or yours) needs a web site with advanced functionality, which Divergent Labs can build. We mainly need a qualified introductions, so decision makers in companies know someone who knows us, and we're not anonymous. Autistic people would be doing the work and getting paid, and Ocate Cliffs gets a cut, and it costs you nothing to introduce us to them.

(5) If you have a relative or link to a foundation or someone who's looking to put money into something good, I can send you an introductory letter tailored for them.

(6) If you're comfortable asking for money directly, people can give amounts of \$250 or more for building materials to support the work campers.

(7) Check out the much longer list of things we need on line (link from ocatecliffs.org)

PERSONAL: I changed my name to Star. Same old person though.

EMAIL LISTS: We have a database of contacts, and three separate opt-in email lists. This newsletter is going to the newsletter list, the widest circle with mail no more often than monthly. The more specific circles are the on-site workers, for those considering the work camp or visiting or eventually working there; and the fundraising circle for those interested in helping on that. Let me know if you want to be in either or both of those lists.

And that's all for this time.
-Star Ford, program manager
Divergent Labs, Inc.

2014 March 25

Hello Ocate Cliffs Supporters:

The snow is mostly gone from the mountain and we're gearing up for some building! The main week of the work camp will be 22-28 June - just three months away. This event will be fun and work, helping with staff house construction, bulding paths, tables, and a tree house, and making paths in the woods. We're looking for people who are excited to be in on the ground floor of this history-making project. Please think about whether you could come, and also please help spread the word.

If you would like to come but can't afford it, please let me know as we have some money available to pay travel costs. I'm mainly looking for people who believe in what we're doing - whether you have any construction skills is not important. So if this feels like the right thing for you to be part of, I want to help you get there.

Full work camp info is on our web site - www.ocatecliffs.org - including registration steps.

Floor plans and other information about the staff house is here:
http://www.ocatecliffs.org/Temp/staff_house_status_20140321_summary.pdf

Cheers,
Star Ford
Program Manager, Divergent Labs Inc

2014 July 1

Dear Ocate Cliffs Enthusiasts :)

A packed newsletter is here. Forwarding is encouraged!

1. STARS, SUNSHINE, FLOWERS AND BEING REPEATEDLY AWESTRUCK

The first work camp was held on the week of June 22nd. Six people worked and cooked and watched the amazing stars ... and laughed and had so much fun!. So many times we would come around to a new view and be awestruck again and again by the extremely varied beauty of the place. It's hard to capture in words or even in pictures but I'll try it with words first. First there are the meadows! There are white flowers with stalks of little blossoms like hyacinths, wild irises, grasses, thistles, lots of color. There's big meadows (many acres) and pockets of little meadows, and they each seem to have a different life. Then there are oak stands with impossibly bright green leaves, making tunnels and hiding places. And there are pine forests with a dark protecting feel, and light uplifting aspen groves with grasses and flowers between that took my breath away. There's sheer red cliffs that provide views to the farms way below and the plains half way to Texas, and which inspire thoughts about the very value of life. And there's even a bit of desert with cactus and a rocky knoll. And I need to also mention currants, mountain mahogany, wild roses, strawberries and raspberries! Just as varied as the terrain and life is the climate. We had cold nights and hot days - some still, some windy times, alternating clear, clouds, rain, hail, and lots of sunshine. We went to a lake with pelicans for swimming and ice cream too.

2. WORK COMPLETED

At the work camp, we accomplished everything on my list of projects, and then we accomplished everything on my list of "extra projects in case we had time". We built about a mile or maybe more of trails looping to the cliffs and back, and up the knoll. We also built a picnic table, two benches, and a tree house, did lots of brush clearing and sawing, removed trash from the old cabin, and jacked up the sinking corner of the cabin.

We also got to see the well drilling rig in action. It has lots of exciting things like a crane, an airplane-like control panel, hydraulic monkey wrench, and enormous drill bits.

3. PARTNERSHIPS AND MONEY

Ocate Cliffs is now a program of the New Mexico Autism Society (as fiscal sponsor) managed by Divergent Labs (as a contractor). That means donations are fully tax deductible. This is a bit of a milestone in the development of relations between the autistic community and the autism community (parents and professionals) which has been a hard bridge to build. I had served on the NMAS board and it was a bit rocky at the time but apparently it planted seeds for working together non-antagonistically. The NMAS executive director has been helpful in fund-raising and the board director was instrumental in getting the partnership going.

I submitted a few grant inquiries and will do two more in July.

4. IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Stay tuned for more opportunities to be at the land and work this summer, or write if you have a

specific time period that you would like to do that. I need some feedback in order to plan when the bigger more formal work times will be.

At the June work camp, we wrote down some ideas for things to change and add to the OC plan. Here is the summary of that conversation:

- * Change the legal structure to allow for more private investment, and seek out investments of 5k and up by families of autistic children. This might be appealing to them because it is an investment in the child's future.
- * Outdoor amphitheater on a hill side
- * Yurts or semi-permanent tents as sleeping spaces or meeting spaces, in addition to the permanent houses. (The yurts would probably have no water or electricity.)
- * Fence across meadow with 2 gates (one on Oak St and one on Ten High Rd past Susan's house)
- * Use posts with different color paint to mark the trail in the meadows where it is hard to find (precut stakes or oak posts from site)
- * Move building site to a place with better views.
- * Build a single large lodge instead of multiple buildings. [Star comment: This can continue to be discussed but changing the site plan is a 1 or 2 year process, so in the meantime we'll keep going with the approved plan.]
- * Change market concept from the current idea (cost-conscious groups such as churches, family reunions and other clubs) to the more elite market where individuals, couples and families may come long distances and pay more. This would require a higher level of restaurant and other services than previously envisioned. It may also entail a smaller overall capacity. [Star comment: I'm not on board with this as a primary target market; my concerns are the size of this market in the southwest, higher facility cost, and ability of autistic people to cater to 1%ers effectively.]

5. ON BEING THE WORLD WE WANT TO CREATE

I'm not sure this is "news" but it is an important idea for me: We have already started doing today what the ultimate goal of Ocate Cliffs is. There is no line between the building and the operating, and there's no need to wait to "finish" something before we can start accomplishing the mission and having an impact. There is just a continuity between now and then. The way we're doing the building is itself a community building retreat. Because this finally hit me more straight-on than before, I've changed the way I'm planning and organizing. All the grant writing we are doing now is focused on getting people to the place and doing intensive building (physical and community) - some focused more on job skills acquisition and some focused on movement building, depending on the funder. The lessons learned from each work camp experience will gradually grow into a shared knowledge of how to run retreats when people come groups as guests for other purposes besides building.

6. HOW MUCH EMAIL DO YOU WANT?

If you are getting this directly, you're in the newsletter circle, which is our widest circle with mail no more often than monthly.

Other options for people who wish to be more involved are:

- * On-site workers distribution list - This is a more inner circle for detailed information about people

coming to workcamps or other things on site.

* Discussion group - This is a google list that allows any level of participation and is intended for people to brainstorm with the most amount of email. You can join it at:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/ocate-cliffs-talk>

* Facebook page - It has some pictures and also allows discussion. Search for "Ocate Cliffs" on facebook and 'like' it, please.

7. FOR THOSE WHO MISSED THE BEGINNING OF ALL THIS...

* Vision: Here's a link to the founding vision paper - <http://tinyurl.com/ocate>

* Our web site - <http://ocatecliffs.org>

* Drawings - Here's the drawings of the staff house, the first house to be built-
http://www.ocatecliffs.org/Temp/staff_house_status_20140321_summary.pdf

* Major projects you can do: see <http://www.divergentlabs.org/tinyapp/Tribe/Needs>

* Donations: see <http://ocatecliffs.org/Home/Involvement>