

The House That Waited: Victor's Journey to Home

High in the treetops, Victor Hartney is at ease. As an arborist and small business owner, they spend much of their time high above the ground, carefully navigating the canopy of Orcas Island. But finding steady ground in their own life has taken years.

Victor's early years were shaped by transition – between divorced parents, between towns, between ideas of who they might become. They tried many paths: English major, welder, seasonal worker. But nothing really stuck for long.

It wasn't until they spent time tending to the old orchard trees at Camp Four Winds that they got into arboriculture. Something about the wild forms of those trees spoke to them, and the suggestion from a dear friend to consider arborist work lit a spark.

That spark led them to become an ISA-certified arborist and to start Wildwood Alliance, a small tree care and landscaping business rooted in



Victor outside their Bonnie Brae home – where roots, at last, can grow deep.

both science and respect for the land. It gave them purpose – but not the stability that they needed. Like many who live and work on Orcas, housing was a constant challenge. They had lived where they worked, in a tent, in borrowed spaces, and often with the fear that a change in job could mean losing their roof, too.

Victor had seen friends purchase housing through OPAL Community Land Trust and decided to apply. Because they had just started a

new business, they didn't meet income requirements for a traditional mortgage loan and the process took longer than expected. So, they paused Wildwood Alliance, picked up part-time jobs, and submitted pay stubs to prove that they were 'stable' – even though it meant earning less in the short term.

Then, Victor was matched with a home in Bonnie Brae. While the loan paperwork crept forward, they moved again, and then again – this time into a borrowed summer cabin with their aging father in tow.

In August 2023, it finally happened. The loan closed and the house was theirs.

Victor's days look different now. They're back to mostly full-time tree work. They're building a shed for the tools of the trade, planting a garden, and thinking about turning the laundry room into a bathroom so their father doesn't have to climb stairs. They even hung up a floating rack for pots and pans – something small, but

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Laying the groundwork for new beginnings at Kidder Way.

Kidder Way Is Under Construction!

In mid-September 2024, the contractors finally rolled onto the property at Kidder Way to set up their job shack and start construction. After a delay of nearly a year due to the County’s inability to process permit applications, and the associated cost increases from that delay, it was a huge relief to get underway.

The Island Excavating crew has installed stormwater detention tanks, septic tanks, and gravel cover for the driveway and parking area. They then turned it over to the crews from Wellman & Zuck and Sea Island Sand & Gravel who worked around the cold snaps to pour concrete footers and walls. Wall framing will start in April.

Tours of the progress will occur as part of OPAL’s Annual Meeting on Thursday, May 8. Come join us!

Progress at Pea Patch Community Campus

Project Phase: Site work including utilities, stormwater management, roads and paving

While there’s not a lot to see on the property yet, it’s been a busy winter of progress on designing the infrastructure for the commons area of the future campus. Working with civil engineers, architects, utility providers and surveyors, a major benchmark was reached in March when the conditional use permit and short plat applications were filed with San Juan County. While permits are being reviewed, the design team will keep working on the next phase of site design so that construction is able to commence as soon as permits are approved and funding is in hand. Fundraising is key, with a focus on public and grant funders for this phase. In February, a team

of islanders visited Olympia to advocate for an appropriation to pay for the site work phase of the project from the Capitol Budget. It’s a deficit budget year, but we’re hopeful because of unified support from our District 40 team: Rep. Lekanoff (lead sponsor); Rep.

Ramel and Sen. Lovelett. The Pea Patch Community Campus will provide food, shelter and wellbeing for the community and strengthen the safety net for islanders experiencing hardships.

Learn more at bit.ly/oipeapatch.



Pea Patch advocates meet with Representative Lekanoff to tell their stories of lived experience of insecurity with food, housing and wellbeing on Orcas. They are (from left) Rusty Diggs, Suzanne Olson, Alex Callen, Rep. Lekanoff, Mariah Armenia, Bob Morris.

Preserving Forest Health for Future Generations

Stewardship – caring for land, homes and relationships – is a foundational value for OPAL.

As we develop affordable housing, we take our responsibility to the environment seriously. OPAL collaborates with experts like Sam Martin of Field & Fern and Carson Sprenger, forester, restoration ecologist and director of Rain Shadow Consulting, to preserve the health of forests and trees.

At April's Grove, several Douglas firs are stressed by drought, soil compaction and root damage from human activity. They are unable to take in enough water. Their silhouettes reveal distress: large gaps of sky are visible between branches as they prematurely lose their needles.

Rain Shadow is treating the trees with a three-pronged approach: whole-tree chip mulch, plant growth regulators (PGR) and compost tea. The mulch retains moisture, cushions foot traffic and decomposes into humic acids that nourish mycorrhizal fungi. PGR encourages shorter, waxier needles with smaller stomata and promotes root growth for better water



Caring for the roots – Carson Sprenger evaluates a tree's health.

uptake. Compost tea adds beneficial micronutrients to support the soil microbiome.

Looking ahead, if OPAL is funded through the Community Foundation's Spring Give Orcas fundraiser, Rain Shadow will evaluate and map the trees on OPAL's 30-acre Bartel Road property, which Carson describes as "a complex, healthy forest with groves of older legacy trees." The evaluation will identify trees that may thrive for centuries or, conversely, pose hazards to neighboring properties.

Rain Shadow will also measure the property's current quantifying carbon resources. OPAL aims to maintain or increase carbon sequestration through careful thinning and replanting, allowing younger trees to grow quickly and capture more carbon. Stewardship for future generations guides OPAL's work.

"Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky."

– Kahlil Gibran

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deeply satisfying. "Every improvement reminds me: this is mine," they said. Asked what they'd tell others still waiting for the chance to own an OPAL home, they didn't hesitate:

"Hold on. It's worth it." After moving more than 10 times in the past nine years, Victor has what they have longed for: solid ground beneath their feet and a home of their own.

And the Orcas community has gained a permanent resident and resource who cares deeply about the island's well-being.



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From one front door to the next – building community, one home at a time.



OPAL's newest board member, Mallory Hagel, is all smiles – and all in.

OPAL's Newest Board Member **Welcoming Mallory Hagel**

Mallory Hagel is an islander at heart – born and raised on Whidbey Island – and now happily living here on Orcas.

Mallory first moved to Orcas in 2015. With a strong background in labor and community organizing, she helped launch the countywide effort to establish the real estate excise tax (REET) for affordable housing, which was passed by voters in 2018.

Returning to Orcas in 2023, Mallory now works remotely, providing high-quality benefits to 55,000 home care workers in Washington and Montana.

She's excited to be a newly appointed trustee of OPAL. She has also joined the County's Housing Advisory Committee in its work to provide housing solutions and reduce homelessness.

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