

Remembering Laird

By Chris Roth

I first met Laird in fall 1986 when a small group of us from End of the Road (the residential community at the place better known as Aprovecho) spent part of a day at nearby Appletree Community, where he and his friend Geoph Kozeny were also visiting (for, I believe, FEC networking meetings held in western Oregon that year).¹

I was struck immediately by the warmth both Laird and Geoph radiated and their interest in people—including, in this case, me, the latest arrival to an impromptu game of badminton. They shared an obvious love of life and of community, accompanied by keen intelligence, wit (coming, however, at no one else's expense), dedication to cooperative ideals, and a sense of fun. All of this I would remember a couple years later when I decided to make a move that would put me in their vicinity again for much more than an afternoon.

Laird had already touched my life from a distance years earlier. I had learned about the Federation of Egalitarian Communities in the pages of my high school library's copies of *COMMUNITIES*, and had sent for more information. In retrospect, I realize that the extensive brochure that arrived, "Living the Dream," had Laird's fingerprints all over it, especially in the portrait of the FEC member community that most inspired me, Sandhill Farm. There, attunement to the earth and living with the land were defining qualities, values held just as strongly as nonviolence, cooperation, and egalitarianism. At that point I fell in love with the dream of living at a place like Sandhill.

When, almost two years after that badminton game at Appletree, End of the Road had started to seem more like "Dead End" to me, I remembered the welcoming energy I'd found in those interactions, as well as my earlier fantasies about transplanting myself into the pages of that FEC brochure. I searched out updated information about Sandhill and other intentional communities, then announced my departure from End of the Road and started a cross-country journey whose first stop was Sandhill Farm, where my visit coincided with sorghum harvest season. Again I felt that sense of affirmation and excitement about life, as well as a deep attunement to place, that I'd gotten tastes of previously. And Laird, who'd cofounded Sandhill, made a point of getting to know me from the very outset by initiating a conversation filled with questions and curiosity—something that I witnessed him doing with each new arrival to this small community. No one spending time at Sandhill in those days felt anonymous—at least not for long—thanks especially to Laird's welcome, and also to that of his fellow communitarians, including his precocious son Ceilee (see remembrances in issue #205), co-parent Ann, and co-parent Stan (see remembrances in issue #193). Others who'd joined more recently also shared in this culture of inclusion and connection, which Laird had been a central part of creating.

After my several-week stint at Sandhill that year I continued on my planned trip East to visit family for Thanksgiving and check out other groups. But after visiting a dozen other communities and even living in one for six months I found myself pulled back to Sandhill, where I'd felt more at home than anywhere else, and returned by the start of the following sorghum season. For the next year-and-a-quarter I was privileged to be part of a remarkably close, well-functioning, land-based community, actually "living the dream" through the sea-

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sons instead of simply reading the brochure.

I couldn't have had this experience by relying on pre-existing personal contacts—I came from a very different background. But fortunately for me and others, the community that Laird and friends had created invited participation from “back-to-the-land newbies” and anyone inspired by their egalitarian vision. A desire to learn, a love of being outdoors, and a solid communitarian work ethic easily made up for lack of previous homesteading experience or pre-existing personal connections. There were also plenty of ways to contribute depending on differing physical abilities and tolerances; child care, preparing meals, and corresponding with potential visitors were valued as highly as hard physical labor or the ability to brave weather extremes to do it. A variety of activities filled everyone's week—and the community culture placed equal importance on personal and group regeneration and nurturance—including meeting our own needs directly from the land without money as an intermediary (we produced 90+ percent of our own food, heated with our own firewood, built mostly with our own lumber, etc.)—as on more conventional income production. The value-added crops that supported us economically required only a minority of our time; the rest could be devoted to creating our lives together, including not only physical self-sustenance but culture-building and welcoming others.

Land-care, community-care, and self-care existed in a balance and seemed mutually reinforcing rather than in contradiction. Ultimately a strong shared connection to the land helped define our bonds within the group and our own personal rhythms. Laird spent 39 years in this community that he cofounded, and over that span many hundreds of people spent significant chunks of time there too. Whether they were visiting for sorghum season, or living there for years or decades, that time helped shape who they were and are. Just as Laird's eventual consulting, facilitation, mediation, and training work with many dozens of distinct groups and with many hundreds of students often had profound, life-changing effects—and is perhaps more likely to be talked about in dispersed communitarian networks—the day-to-day experiences that countless people had at Sandhill, due in part to Laird's integral role there, are irreplaceable parts of numerous individuals' personal journeys through life.

Both during my first times at Sandhill (late '80s-early '90s) and my later stay there (spring through fall 2010, an attempt to reprise my earlier experience), I witnessed firsthand the qualities for which Laird is legendary. He was an apparently tireless worker, incredibly productive and efficient, finding joy in the effort; a “slow” or “low-productivity” day for him could still run circles around many other people's most productive days. Yet he was also someone who knew how to relax and bring people together to simply “be”; he was skilled in coalescing group energy whether in work or in celebration or camaraderie. His epic cook shifts were just as “all-in” as his epic food-preservation shifts or his epic sorghum-harvesting shifts or his epic sugar-house shifts, and had the same kind of abundant results. He was not ambivalent about life, and not someone to half-do anything.

He inspired that same dedication and immersion-in-life in others, while tending to attract those who also found joy in commitment to whatever they were doing. Stan's and

Laird's tag-team all-nighters in the sugar shack, boiling down sorghum molasses or maple syrup during the short, intense windows of harvest and processing for each of those crops, were examples to me of “work as love made manifest”—and similar examples seemed to abound wherever Laird was involved.

During my first stints at Sandhill, these character qualities seemed to be almost purely assets in community. Laird was one of three functional parents to Ceilee (not yet 10 years old then), and had close connections to every member of the community. Twenty years later, when I returned, all other human members of that earlier iteration of Sandhill Farm, with the exception of Stan, had moved on, replaced by newer members. The nature of the community had started to change in multiple ways; interpersonal and generational conflicts were more evident; and Laird, who was now married to a non-resident of Sandhill, had also shifted much of his focus and nearly limitless energy to his consulting, facilitation, mediation, and training work with often far-flung groups (usually reached via Amtrak). I now sensed a sometimes painful distance, created by circumstance and by shifting community dynamics, even when Laird was physically present—which he was, operating at double-time as usual, for approximately half the days of each year. Despite the more fragmented feel of the community at that time, his contributions continued to be abundant, with food-preservation shifts becoming even more intense and productive because they were squeezed into narrower travel-dictated time windows, and his meal-preparation shifts equally impressive. Meanwhile, his contri-

butions in the larger communities world were blossoming in ways that many on site had only inklings of.

Within a couple years of my own next return to Oregon, he would leave Sandhill, and more changes were to follow. In the end, thankfully, he did spend his final days surrounded by the kind of love, support, and extended community that he had offered others throughout his life—and these came to him in ways that would not have happened if he had resisted the changes that took him away from his long-term community home, difficult though that separation was.

I had the privilege of working closely with Laird on several projects. One was the first book-length *Directory of Intentional Communities* (1990/91) published by FIC, put together by a team that included Geoph Kozeny (camped out at Sandhill for many months in a trailer), Laird, Becca Krantz (now part of the fundraising team for Laird's book project), and me. A few years later, Laird would lead the rescue of COMMUNITIES by bringing it under FIC's wing to resume publication after a couple years' lapse, with Diana Leafe Christian (currently assembling a broader set of tributes to Laird for issue #207) as new editor and Laird being a consistent champion of the magazine as publisher.

When I became editor in 2008, Laird and I began corresponding frequently, not only about his quarterly columns but about all things magazine-related. When I moved

to Sandhill again for the growing season of 2010, he, Yana Ludwig, and I revived a project that had been dormant: revisions of the "reprint packets" of past COMMUNITIES articles. This developed into the 15-volume *Best of COMMUNITIES* series, still available through the FIC bookstore. He continued to be an invaluable source of advice and support for the magazine until the end of his tenure as FIC Executive Secretary, and even after that he could be relied on to craft (at my request) writing to respond to particular needs, and to shape blog entries into publishable articles. His "wordplay volume" varied, from as low as 1 or 2 to as high as "11" ("Minding the 'P's for Cues," COMMUNITIES #143, is one memorable example of the latter), but it was never entirely absent, reflecting a palpable joy in language that helps explain his written productivity. All told, Laird wrote more than 130 articles for the magazine—more than anyone else ever has. More important, Laird's belief in the value of the magazine quite literally saved it from oblivion more than three decades ago; his ongoing involvement and energetic support helped keep it going for decades more; and as with everything he did in life, he was generous in what he offered and shared in its pages.

Laird also shared himself generously with my home community in Oregon, as he did with many others, offering consultation and facilitation help at times when we especially needed it. Despite the strong value Laird placed on effectiveness and on reaching well-chosen goals, the personal qualities that shone through in his in-person talks and workshops, and also in simply spending time with him, weren't primarily or solely about "work" or "accomplishing things" in a conventional sense, but about valuing each person and finding our points of connection (thus, happily, also making "work" and "accomplishing things" a lot easier). Laird believed that we do have the capacity to be "living the dream" (whether that includes going back-to-the-land as a primary focus, or simply going back-to-cooperative-connection no matter what the physical setting). His work and his example were constant inspirations not only to me but to countless others...and will continue to be.

More remembrances will be coming in issue #207, from a wide variety of voices. I could write much more myself, but I will end this here for now. Laird's long survival under a terminal diagnosis gave many years to prepare for this moment, and yet it is still difficult to say goodbye. It is also easy, however, to feel gratitude for all the time that Laird was able to be with us, often defying the odds and making the most of life in typical Laird style.

Thank you, Laird. 🌱

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES. As mentioned, the Summer 2025 issue will include a more extensive tribute to Laird; to submit your memories for possible last-minute inclusion, please email editor@gen-us.net as soon as possible.

1. Some background for those less familiar: The Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC) is a network of income-sharing communities based on equality, nonviolence, ecological principles, and collective stewardship rather than individual ownership; Laird played a central role for many years. Both Laird's home community, Sandhill Farm (Rutledge, Missouri), and Appletree Community (Saginaw, Oregon) were among the members at that time; End of the Road/Aprovecho (Cottage Grove, Oregon) was not. Geoph Kozeny, the Peripatetic Communitarian, traveled the intentional communities world presenting an ever-expanding slideshow and eventually creating the *Visions of Utopia* videos, a project which Laird brought to completion. More stories about these involvements and many others are likely to appear in COMMUNITIES #207.

