

BONDED BY LOVE OF TREES

Tom and Leslie
Bonkowski fell
in love as volunteers
for planting projects.

By **SONYA SMITH**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

In a Lake Arrowhead cabin built in 1926, Tom and Leslie Bonkowski take refuge from suburbia and restore nature together.

The couple live in San Clemente, but they venture to the mountain cabin about once a month. Each visit, they work to restore the cabin to its 1920s charm.

The two-story house is surrounded by trees - blooming dogwoods, strong oaks, sugar pines. Some of the trees stand 10 feet high, others tower above the cottage some 100 feet into the sky.

Inside, the cabin smells woody from the original pine paneling, and woodpeckers can be heard chipping away at trees. Squirrels, blue jays and robins

are regular guests.

Here Tom and Leslie return to an earlier, simpler time.

The television stays dark. Instead the couple listens to the radio and plays parlor games - Scrabble, mini-ping pong and Sequence.

"When we're up in the mountains we can think about our lives and put everything into perspective. It's our place of tranquillity," Leslie says.

The couple's affinity for this rustic setting is fitting, given that they met planting trees and spend much of their free time as volunteers helping others plant trees.

THROUGH THE TREES

This love story begins at the Irvine Ranch Water District. Leslie has worked there since 1978, Tom since 1982.

On Arbor Day in 1992 the two were falling in love at a tree planting sponsored by Shadetree Partnership Inc. The volunteer organization, sponsored in part by the water district, brings volunteers together once a month to plant trees and shrubs in schools, parks and other public spaces.

That day Tom, Leslie and other volunteers planted toy pines, coastal live oak, sycamores and poplars on a small hill at Michelson Drive and Riparian Way near the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary.

About 10 years later they were married under those same trees.

Tom says working with the organization is how he and Leslie help beautify the community.

"Every day we take from Mother Earth. We need to give back and do anything we can to become productive citizens," Tom says. "We just tried to take the next step in the organization."

Today, Tom is general manager; Leslie is secretary of the Shadetree nursery.

Since the Bonkowskis joined in 1992, the organization has had 125 events and planted about 22,000 trees around the county.

TREES: Leslie greets the volunteers,

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2006

Tom coordinates



LEONARD ORTIZ, THE REGISTER

UNDER THE SHADE TREE: Tom and Leslie Bonkowski are volunteers with Shadetree Partnership Inc., a nursery at UCI that provides free trees and plants to nonprofit organizations.



WEED PATROL: Leslie Bonkowski removes weeds from plants at the nursery, the source of trees and shrubs for planting.

THE NURSERY

On a recent day at the nursery, a 5-acre plot on the UC Irvine campus donated by the university, the couple shared their trees.

A gravel path leads to rows of young poplars, tall sycamores and deep-green pines. About 8,000 trees and shrubs are grown here.

Tom explains that this nursery was started in 1980 as part of the California Relief Program, aimed at restoring natural habitat. In about 1994, it broke off as an independent group.

Trees planted by nursery volunteers can be found along both sides of the San Diego Creek Channel in Irvine, in Bark Park – the dog park next

to the Irvine Animal Care Center, and at almost every school in the city.

Tom and Leslie walk through one of three greenhouses on the site, one of the many structures built by boys as Eagle Scout projects.

The wood-frame greenhouse with its weather-worn plastic sheets holds hundreds of pots growing the county's future oxygen-providers – some just budding and others about a foot tall.

Here, Tom says, about two years ago a troop of Girl Scouts came to volunteer. For a full day, the girls picked up acorns dropped by oak trees at the nursery and planted them in pots inside a greenhouse.

Somehow, the greenhouse door was left open a crack, and that night a stealthy thief sneaked in.

The next day, the Bonkowskis found a fat and happy squirrel who had dined on almost all of the acorns.

Now they always make sure the doors are closed.

SHARING A PASSION

At the monthly tree and shrub plantings, the couple

GO & DO

What: Pre-Valentine Day Nursery Planting. Bare-root trees will be planted for "United Voices for a Healthy Environment" projects, and other trees will be moved into larger containers. Other tasks include weeding, watering and staking plants. Doughnuts will be available in the morning; a barbecue is to be held after the event.

When: 8:30-11 a.m. Feb. 10.

Where: Shadetree nursery, directions at www.shadetreepartnership.org

Who: Volunteers welcome.

Contact: 949-453-5312 or bonkowsl@irwd.com

have a regular routine.

Leslie greets volunteers with her bubbly voice. She gives them name tags – but instead of names, volunteers are asked to pick a tree.

Leslie explains that she's more of a soft pink crape myrtle tree. She calls Tom a solid oak.

Tom then takes over – taking the young and old, gardeners and non-gardeners – to sections of the planting site and showing them what to do. Some plant seedlings, others tend the ground.

He has some fun with it, and asks people to plant some trees just a bit off kilter. That way – in future years – they'll be able to easily recognize their out-of-line trees.

"It gives the trees personality, so they don't look like lollipops," he says.

After each planting the two, hand in hand, walk around the site rejoicing in how bare earth has been transformed into a lush garden. They enjoy passing their love of nurturing nature to others.

"People want to do the right thing and volunteer, but they often don't know how," Tom says. "We offer the how."

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