

Tahoe trails guru taking on bigger role in USFS



Garrett Villanueva is co-owner of Sawyer Wooden Board Company.
Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

It's hard to imagine with his low-key style and everyday dad demeanor, but trails guru Garrett Villanueva is placing Lake Tahoe on the map – yet again.

Villanueva was promoted in December to trail and travel management leader for the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Regional office. The responsibilities encompass the entire state of California. Villanueva has already been diving in. He's working on five environmental impact statements and

three recreational components to Forest Service plans.

Some might buckle under the pressure. But this is just how the 46-year-old recreational enthusiast rolls.

He worked his way up with the Forest Service in the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, arriving in South Lake Tahoe in 1998 from Arizona where he worked as a hydrologist for the Environmental Protection Agency.

"I never thought I'd work in government this long," Villanueva said, while watching his 8-year-old son, Jace, hop over wooden platform jumps built by dad. The duo was having a father-son day that started with skiing out of Mott's Canyon on Heavenly and ended with ice cream.

He snickered while reminiscing about the times in Arizona. He didn't quite enjoy the job and couldn't believe it half the time. He had to talk to property owners who wouldn't think twice about pouring toxic chemicals into the ground about the importance of protecting the environment.

Some of these people were rough around the edges. He recalled going out on a field visit that turned into a little-too-close-for-comfort drug bust. He followed law enforcement at full speed on a back road. When they showed up at the house, their guns were drawn. Villanueva took shelter at his vehicle.

"They told me to keep my head down," he said.

Since then, the agency decided to review its safety protocols.



Garrett Villanueva's garage is full of toys to use in Tahoe. Photo/Susan Wood

So, coming to South Lake Tahoe in 1998 may have represented a walk in the park. He started out as a temporary employee in a job that monitored whether the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, an arm of the Forest Service here, was performing up to par since the first environmental summit that brought out President Bill Clinton.

Eight months later, he became a full time engineering technician. In 2002, he became a civil engineer – a position he kept through 2015.

"I have an affinity for seeing things in a three dimensional way," he said of his long tenure with the Forest Service.

That well-rounded experience got him on board the Forest Service's International Programs run out of Washington, D.C. He visited Israel and Brazil to go over land management practices designed to help spur tourism through trail building and sustainable environmental practices.

"People will travel for trails," he told *Lake Tahoe News*, simplifying the missions. He contends building trails is an

integral part of community health by using land for recreational purposes.

He's had a lot of practice.

Villanueva was instrumental in designing the trails throughout the basin. Most notably, he cited the Cold Creek Trail out to High Meadows from Pioneer Trail as especially challenging but rewarding. It turned out the public was extremely persistent on having it along the river.

"It took more effort and cost a lot more, but it turned out more desirable," he said.

And that made all the difference in the world.

The Corral Trail represents another locally driven project he was glad to work on. Then, there's the Freel Trail, named after the dominant peak. The Camp Richardson Trail from years ago remains the most popular. And now, he's very excited about the State-to-State project between California and Nevada as well as the Kingsbury "Stinger" from the Grade.

Villanueva also knows how to build bridges, figuratively and literally.

There's the Ward Creek Bridge on the Tahoe Rim Trail.



Garrett Villanueva, left, with Mike Gabor and Jacob Quinn work on South Shore trail plans. Photo/LTN file

So, how is Lake Tahoe doing in terms of being on the frontline of mountain bike trail building?

“Lake Tahoe is an example in large part of sustainable trail systems. It’s an amazing community and has a lot of cohesion,” he said.

This declaration speaks to why he said he in part wouldn’t have taken the job if it meant moving away. So now he does a lot of remote work in checking in with the regional office in Vallejo.

He’s enjoying life, but still thinks about what would be his dream job. He’s also an accomplished paddleboard builder, making about a half dozen high-end boards for various people. He was working in the shop in his garage on his latest board for Phil Moulton to put up at Cold Water Brewery.

“He’s very smart, easy to talk to. I think he’s successful at anything he works on, and he’s got a great work-life balance,”

Moulton said of Villanueva. "Our kids play together, a small town you know."

Villanueva's roots are not only deep in Tahoe, they're engrained in his talents to build things. His father started him young, insisting they build a shed one day. At age 8, he decided to take the lawn mower apart. His father just shook his head when he saw his young enterprising son holding a piston in his hand, wondering what to do next, Villanueva recalled.

Villanueva's buddy and fellow mountain bike rider Ben Fish isn't surprised how his friend has moved up in the Forest Service.

The duo worked together on the popular city-run Bijou Mountain Bike Park, among other projects. The latest will be the Trails Summit, sponsored by the Tahoe Area Mountain Bike Association. The summit will highlight Tahoe's prominence in the mountain bike world and is set for May 6-8.

For starters, TAMBA's resurgence from years of dwindling down to a few members to now a few hundred speaks volumes on the growing popularity of the sport and the persistence of those like Villanueva who dedicate their lives to supporting it with a trail system.

"It makes me proud to see him go and be almost like a spokesman of Tahoe," said Fish, who's known Villanueva socially for a decade.

It's all in the family of riding and sharing experiences. Their sons are good friends.

"He's pushed all the buttons. We had six or seven years with no mountain bike organization. He helped get TAMBA back together," said Fish, while manning a TAMBA booth at the Lake Tahoe Business Expo.

“These projects would have never happened without him,” he told *Lake Tahoe News*.