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Natural Areas Rangers Celebrate 20 Years of Service

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Ranger Kristin Powell has seen a lot of change in Fort Collins. She remembers when there were just a handful of natural areas, she carried a mobile phone as big as a box of tissues, and her main enforcement concern was dogs off-leash. Powell was one of the original rangers hired by the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department twenty years ago. A polaroid picture (it was before digital) shows her smiling in front of a sign about the city's new "World Wide Web Site" with clip art of a bulky computer. Over the years, Powell learned that "being a ranger is so much more than just law enforcement. Rangers should be approachable, helpful and guide visitors to enjoy natural areas as well as understand the rules and regulations. Our emphasis on being out-and-about on bikes or hiking on the same trails as visitors carries through to today's patrols. From those innocent beginnings, I never would have expected to be here, 20 years later, with issues that are much more serious," she related.

Positive community interactions are very important, in fact, rangers report six times the number of informational and positive contacts as compared to tickets and warnings. In the early days, Rangers even offered coupons for free ice cream to dog guardians who were following the rules. Powell explained, "Rangers are partners with the community in encouraging both stewardship and safety. We are a line of protection for the natural resources that the community treasures. We help visitors with everything from trail directions to emergency rescues."

Over time, as Fort Collins' population grew, so did the number of natural areas and miles of trail to be patrolled. "Two rangers were not nearly enough. We were frantically trying to work holidays, weekends, evenings and meet the increasing administrative demands and there was no way to keep up" said Powell with exasperation. The issues got more serious as well. "We saw evidence of more serious crimes, and now, Fort Collins is a lot more urban, with problems like drug use and violence. We don't have the capacity to handle all law enforcement situations with our limited commission and only a few intermediary weapons on our duty belt," Powell continued. City code and natural areas regulations are enforced on foot and by bike without firearms, and rangers must call for backup from the police. Additional rangers help too- the team has grown from two to seven. Rangers' most frequent citations are for illegal camping, after-hours violations, and closed trail use, with dogs off-leash ranking third or fourth in most years.

With an eye towards the next 20 years, now Senior Lead Ranger Powell explained "we are working on policies and code changes that would protect us better. Our primary focus remains citizen safety and protection of natural resources." Even with more urban problems, "after 20 years, I still love my job and am passionate about what I do everyday" Powell said with a smile. "I can't believe we are celebrating our 20th anniversary!"

These days when Powell heads off on patrol she still uses a mountain bike, but this time, instead of an awkward phone ala 1998, she is equipped with many more tools on her duty belt, a mobile laptop, a smartphone, and that same friendly attitude that has ensured the success of the Ranger program from the beginning.