

‘I’m proud of what we did’

Ranger Ed Rizzotto: An interview with historian Alison Steiner

Ed Rizzotto left the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office in 1988 for a job in Gateway National Recreation Area. His seven years in Gateway helped him recognize the unique role that urban parks play in people’s everyday lives. During an interview conducted for the ANPR Oral History Project, Ed reflected on the decisions he made while working as a center director, management assistant and unit superintendent of Staten Island.

Rizzotto: The last night I was in the regional office, I was moving 28 crates of references and books that I’d accumulated. I’m doing this at 10 o’clock at night. This protection ranger comes through.

He said, “What are you doing?”

I said, “I’m packing for my next job.”

He said, “Where are you going?”

I said, “I’m going to Gateway.”

And he said, “I used to work at Gateway.”

I said, “Oh, yeah?”

We talked about it a little bit, and he said to me, “You know... there’s a right way, there’s a wrong way, and there’s the Gateway.”

I said, “What does that mean?”

He said, “You’ll find out.”

Gateway was a unique experience. It was trying to do Park Service stuff for people in a big urban area who were never going to see the Park Service any other way. There are people in New York who never leave the city. Never drive.

At some point in that experience, I was at lunch with a guy named Bob Barbee. He was at Yellowstone, and we were schmoozing. I was saying, “You have a great job. What a terrific job. I would love to have your job.”

He said, “You know, you’re really doing a more important job in some ways because the average visitor to Yellowstone travels more than 800 miles to get there, which means lots and lots of people never get there. It is too far and too expensive. So they aren’t going to see the mother park or the premier sites that we all know about.”

His point was that they had to see the green and gray in New York City. Because then, when their congressman came home for a town hall meeting and said, “Do we need more jails? Do we need more highways? Do we need to build a sewer plant?” someone might put up his hand and go, “The Park Service has taught my eighth grader environmental science. The only time we camped out was at Gateway.” They would, in a small way, see the Park Service there . . .



Ed Rizzotto with his daughters, Amy (left) and Melissa

A kind of a sad thing we would do. Not sad. I don’t know the right word for this. Riis Park is a big ocean beach that the Park Service runs. When it was very hot, a lot of people would come down from what we would call tenements. The upper part of the city had old, old, nasty housing that typically didn’t have any air conditioning. And they were living in little boxes, not necessarily even with airshafts. They’d come down to the park for the day, you know, which normally closed at sunset. But we let them stay.

We put a few extra rangers on. [The visitors] would bring their blankets and their picnic gear, and they’d kind of roll up in their blankets. We’d let them sleep on the beach because it was so much better than forcing them back up into what you’d probably call slums.

I was the Staten Island Unit superintendent. We went through a big development program. We renovated the marina. We built new bathhouses. We built new concessions. We did a lot of concerts and activities there. So we had our fun there, and we hopefully exposed people to the Park Service.

And again this is people who’ve never had a chance to go to Rocky Mountain. They haven’t been to Two Ocean Plateau in Yellowstone. They haven’t been to Kings Canyon. But, they’re still getting those values and exposures.

There is a Gateway, but it’s not a bad way.

Steiner: Listening to you, it’s clear that you believe very strongly that urban parks are critical not only to the populations that use them, but also to the Park Service in accom-

plishing its mission. How did you feel being so involved in these urban places? Did you feel a part of the Park Service community?

Rizzotto: They’re a little bit different. But the Bob Barbee story . . . I’m having lunch with Bob Barbee, and he explains to me what I kind of already knew. Why the Gateways are important. Okay? And I believe him. I always did. It didn’t mean that they were more important. They may have been less important. But they were part of creating a national picture for a citizenry.

We need to educate as many people as we can about the lessons the Park Service holds. I think the Park Service has a vital role. And I think the urban parks are included in that because they’re going to reach lots and lots of people who are never going to get to the other places.

When you look at how the balance is in Congress, we need people valuing us, understanding us, supporting us, from everywhere. They can’t be just rich white kids who went to prep school and had the summer to travel out West. It’s got to be kids from the city, kids from poor families. Most of the urban parks don’t have entry fees. If you’re having a hard time with food, and a park is \$20 a year to get into, you wouldn’t go. But you can go to Gateway and you can remember that they took you in at night when it was too hot and uncomfortable to go home.

People would die in those tenements. I don’t mean everybody, but older people who were under stress. No air conditioning, maybe nobody watching them. It was shelter. And those people got to come to the parks, got the experiences. It’s a hot day. Don’t worry. The parks are open. Everything will be fine. Rangers are here to watch you.

I’m proud of what we did. 🏡

Ed Rizzotto retired in 2011 after a nearly 46-year career, mostly with the National Park Service. He lives in Massachusetts. Alison Steiner is the assistant wilderness coordinator at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

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