



# Married by Nature

By Kristi Evans

**A** love for the outdoors brought Zach and Laura (Peterson) Gray together. They met through NMU outdoor recreation classes and were married in November near Zion National Park. He is a trails work leader at Olympic National Park in Washington, while she is a fire ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service in Utah. Their commuter relationship is made easier by matching work schedules of eight days on/six days off.

**Zach '08 BS** coordinates field work for a crew of seven permanent and 10 seasonal employees who maintain the trail system in Olympic National Park. He determines where to send them and which projects to assign, based on reports of issues received from crew members, backcountry rangers and volunteer hiking enthusiasts.

“They work on steps, staircases and some backcountry structures,” Zach says. “They might build bridges by hand using downed trees or make hand-split boards and railings. We

even have larger bridges flown in by helicopter that need to be installed. There’s just under a million acres of wilderness and 98 percent of what we do as a trail crew is in the wilderness area. I also coordinate the pack stock program, where we use horses to transport food and supplies to backcountry crews.”

Olympic National Park was established 75 years ago with Franklin D.

Roosevelt’s signature. It bills itself as three magical parks in one.

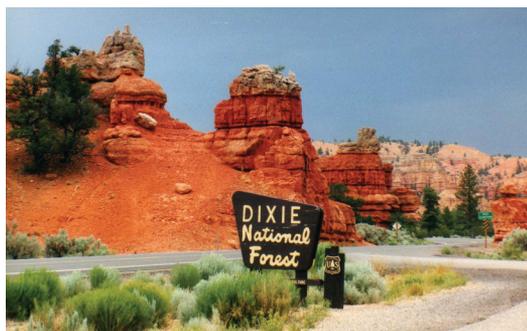
“It’s an adventurer’s paradise,” agrees Zach. “You can start at sea level, walking on sandy beaches, then hike through a rainforest and up to mountaintop glaciers over 11,000 feet. I like the rainforest area best. You’re by the water looking at the mountains and surrounded by these ginormous, old-growth trees.”

**Laura '07 BS** took a wildland firefighting course at NMU (the

university now offers a minor) and knew she wanted to pursue a related career out West. She works primarily at the Dixie and Fishlake National Forests in Utah. She monitors how the ecosystem interacts with fire—whether it’s ignited naturally, by human carelessness or through a prescribed burn, which is a natural resource management strategy that removes dead vegetation and non-native species.

“For prescribed burns, we have to do environmental impact assessments beforehand so we can justify why it’s necessary to burn a particular area,” Laura says. “The other part is adaptive management: Are we burning too hot or not hot enough for aspen regeneration and for different plant species to come up? They need certain conditions.

“On the ground, I help with digging lines and working with fire. I also collect a lot of data on fuel loading, or how much and what type of trees, shrubs and grass there is to burn. Then



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I go in after a burn and see what else is there. During the winter, I analyze the data and write reports for other field specialists. There are eight districts within these two forests, so there are a lot of reports.”

Laura plans to split her winter work, which can be done remotely, between Utah and Washington so that she can spend more time with Zach—countering the heat of wildfires with the soothing northern rainforest. ■