

by **Paige Culver**

WSF Development Manager

GIANTS IN OUR FRONT YARD

“Do what you can, with what have, where you are.”

—Teddy Roosevelt

We step out onto the modest front porch and make our way across the lawn. Bayfield had some nice rain showers over the summer and the grass, beautiful vines, and tender flowers around the house are lush and fragrant, especially for mid-August. “Now, come across the lawn this way and look down at the grass,” George says. I do as I am told. We keep walking. “Keep looking down,” he reminds me. I wonder to myself, *What on earth am I looking for?* while simultaneously really enjoying the cushion of a beautifully kept yard under my feet. “Ok, stop.” I stop. “Now... look up.” I raise my eyes and then my head follows.... Up, up, and up. Before I know it, I’m staring heavenward through the wild and beautifully craggy branches of a 350-year-old pine tree. My breath catches. It’s about two in the afternoon and the sun is bright but barely able to pierce through the layers of ancient arms to its admirers below. It is truly something to behold, and we all marvel silently for a few moments at this bit of creation, which is truly special, and is conveniently sitting there for us all to enjoy, right in the front yard.

In fall 2021, I received a call out of the blue after launching a campaign to help put some funds in the Wild Sheep Legacy Foundation’s coffers. “Is this Paige?!” said a cheerful voice with just the slightest drawl. “Yes, this is Paige. How can I help you?”

“Well, you’re just the gal I was looking for! This is George Van Den Berg, and I want to give you some money.” As one might imagine, this is not typically how my phone calls go. George had heard of our campaign to help secure the future of the Wild Sheep Foundation by adding to our Endowment Fund;



George & Grace Van Den Berg at their home in Bayfield, CO.

he was on board and ready to help. George and I spoke for a bit and after getting the details of his gift lined out, he finished out our conversation by saying, “I want to say thank you for all you do.” His gratitude for everything would be a recurring theme throughout every subsequent conversation. Throwing in a couple more friendly phone calls, fast

forward to *Sheep Show*® 2022. I’m doing my typical scuttling around as I try to keep up with the demands of the show when I see our then, Board Chair, Dr. Peri Wolff, come around the corner. Following her was a gentleman with a gait that spoke of many rigorous mountain adventures, wearing a cowboy hat and the biggest smile I’ve ever seen. Mind you, I had not ever met George in person. “I had to come meet the sweet gal I’ve been talking to!” he said. From there, we quickly fell into an easy friendship.

George Van Den Berg was born in 1934 in a small ranching community in Colorado.

At one point during my visit with George, I was admiring a “Norman Rockwell-esque” picture hanging in his kitchen when he walked up behind me and said, “That’s how I grew up!” The picture depicts a mother in a chair with a young child in her lap next to a wood-burning stove. A small calf is curled up on the floor in front of the stove, and the father is standing opposite them in a potato-farmer style hat and his work clothes. It was no surprise to me that this was a nostalgic scene after having spent some time with George. Being from a ranching family, he and his siblings were no strangers to hard work. Like many children of his time, he grew up hunting squirrels and rabbits and other small game. When he got a bit older, he and his brother started chasing big bull elk in the mountains of Colorado. I chuckle as I recall George describing a rutting bull bugling in one’s face as, “A real kick in the butt”. He’s not wrong. For



George with his granddaughter, Mindy Paulek, and her father, Nick Paulek, with George's bighorn taken in 2008 from the Needle Mountain Range, a subrange of the San Juan Mountains of the Rockies.

many years, he thought that was the end-all, be-all of big game hunting. Then, in 1968 at 34 years old, George went on his first self-guided bighorn sheep hunt. From there, as happens with many first-time sheep hunters, George was smitten. Something about the elusive creatures delighted his soul.

George readily admits that he has put himself in some rather precarious situations over the years just trying to observe them in their natural habitat, often going in way too far, and often going it alone. Shortly before my visit, George had just come back from a helicopter ride for the sole purpose of surveying the sheep and hopefully getting some intel for Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). He has an affinity for that agency, as he served on the Colorado Game Commission from 1985-1993. During his time of service, he helped reintroduce bighorn sheep back to the area. Incredibly, after laborious weeks of removing 100-year-old telegraph wire from the nationally acclaimed train route running from Durango to Silverton, a healthy herd of bighorn sheep was transported via the same train route, and successfully released in the Cascade Canyon Wye paralleling the Animas River.

This incredible feat is only a sliver of the lifelong dedication that George has graciously given to wildlife conservation, and wild sheep in particular.

Being a wildlife biologist for more than 45 years, WSF Vice-President for Conservation Kevin Hurley has known and worked with George, for decades. "When I need to know something about bighorn sheep in Colorado, George is often the first call I make," stated Hurley. "I learn something about wild sheep every time I chat with George, and I have the utmost respect for the man, and what he's done," added Hurley. "George always has a story to tell, and I believe some of them are even true," kidded Hurley. "I just enjoy sitting, chatting, and learning from George; he is a wealth of knowledge, and a great sheep conservationist."

I was reluctant to leave Colorado, but before I did, George wanted to show me one more thing. We drove about 20 minutes up the highway to a plot of open field. This field once belonged to George and he still cares for it, gladly and lovingly, as a help to the new owners and because it is a source of pride. Just along the edge of the property is a 12-acre parcel that George set aside as a wildlife

preserve. It gives refuge to a wide variety of animals, including deer and elk. From that spot he points in the direction of the mountainside where he took his last sheep at the age of 75.

Folks like George are inspiring, and they're all around us. Just knowing them makes us strive to be better, to do better. George would never admit to having deserved any admiration for his contribution to wild sheep and the natural world. In fact, he didn't even want me to write an article about him! But, like the towering 350-year-old pine in his front yard, George's life is worthy of recognition. Without saying a word, they both invoke a deep sense of appreciation and respect. Both are giants, right "in the front yard". It's our responsibility to stop, look up, and appreciate what's been in front of us all along.

Thank you, George, for sharing your time, talent, treasure...and friendship. WS

For more information on the Wild Sheep Foundation's giving societies or to make a donation, please contact WSF Development Manager, Paige Culver at 406-404-8758 or pculver@wildsheepfoundation.org.