Managing in Minnesota: USU Grad Finds Forestry Career in the Land of 10,000 Lakes
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Sarah Cross Brown is big on ‘Take Two’ experiences. The first time around, for instance, her university path didn’t quite click. She could never quite find her focus at the large university she attended after high school and after a year she decided to ‘take a break.’ Two decades later, halfway across the country, with twenty years of lived and worked experience under her belt, Brown found her educational stride at the Quinney College of Natural Resources.

“Whenever I talk to people who are considering whether they should go back to school as a non-traditional student, who wonder if it is too late to start a new career when they are out of their twenties, I tell them to go for it.” said Brown, now Timber Program and Assistant Area Supervisor in the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Utah State University was a favorable fit for Brown’s style of learning. As she pursued a forestry degree from the Department of Wildland Resources she noticed that her professors knew her by name, which made it easier to become engaged, and harder to miss classes when they noticed you were absent, she said. She learned not to be afraid to speak up and get her questions answered.

After graduation in 2016, Brown decided that state government was the place she wanted to make a career as it offered more variety than private or federal land management agencies where employees are sometimes pigeonholed into particular tasks such as timber sales or fire prevention. She accepted an entry-level forestry position with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources in Warroad, Minnesota, a small, flat, marshy community just five miles south of the Canadian border, peppered with aspen and Norway pine.

Warroad was a great place to launch, and to get lots of hands-on experience, she said. Entry-level positions require a little bit of everything, and change with the seasons. Brown had the chance to take helicopters to drop water over wildfires and to take tracked vehicles topped with water-spraying guns into the backcountry to assist with wildfire suppression. In the winter she administered timber sales or evaluated timber quality to set up future contracts. In the spring she worked on tree planting and regeneration projects. Summer meant working with the public.

Brown is now on her second appointment in Minnesota, working among the black walnut and red oak trees of Lake City, Minnesota on the Mississippi River—a current ‘Take Two’ experience. She’s happy for this next step, but she also really valued her time in Warroad as it allowed her a chance to take on responsibilities and work her way up the chain of command.

“I’m the kind of person who just takes things as they come. I knew I wanted a career that I was proud of, where I was making a difference,” she said, “and that’s where I am now. There is a lot to learn here and that’s where I’m putting my attention and energy.”

Her advice for current students is to pursue internship opportunities whenever possible.

“The experience you get in the field every summer can really count,” she said. “It helps you to figure out what you want to end up doing before a long-term commitment, and when you get a job, it really helps to have already developed some of the skills and knowledge it is going to require.”

Also, she said, don’t be too picky about where you start your career. Being willing to pursue a ‘Take Two’ experience opens up all sorts of opportunities you might not have considered at the outset, she said. Getting your foot in the door can be the hardest part.
“Some people expect their dream job right away. But if you don’t have the experience, just start somewhere, and then options tend to open up,” she said.