

Winter '25/'26 Newsletter

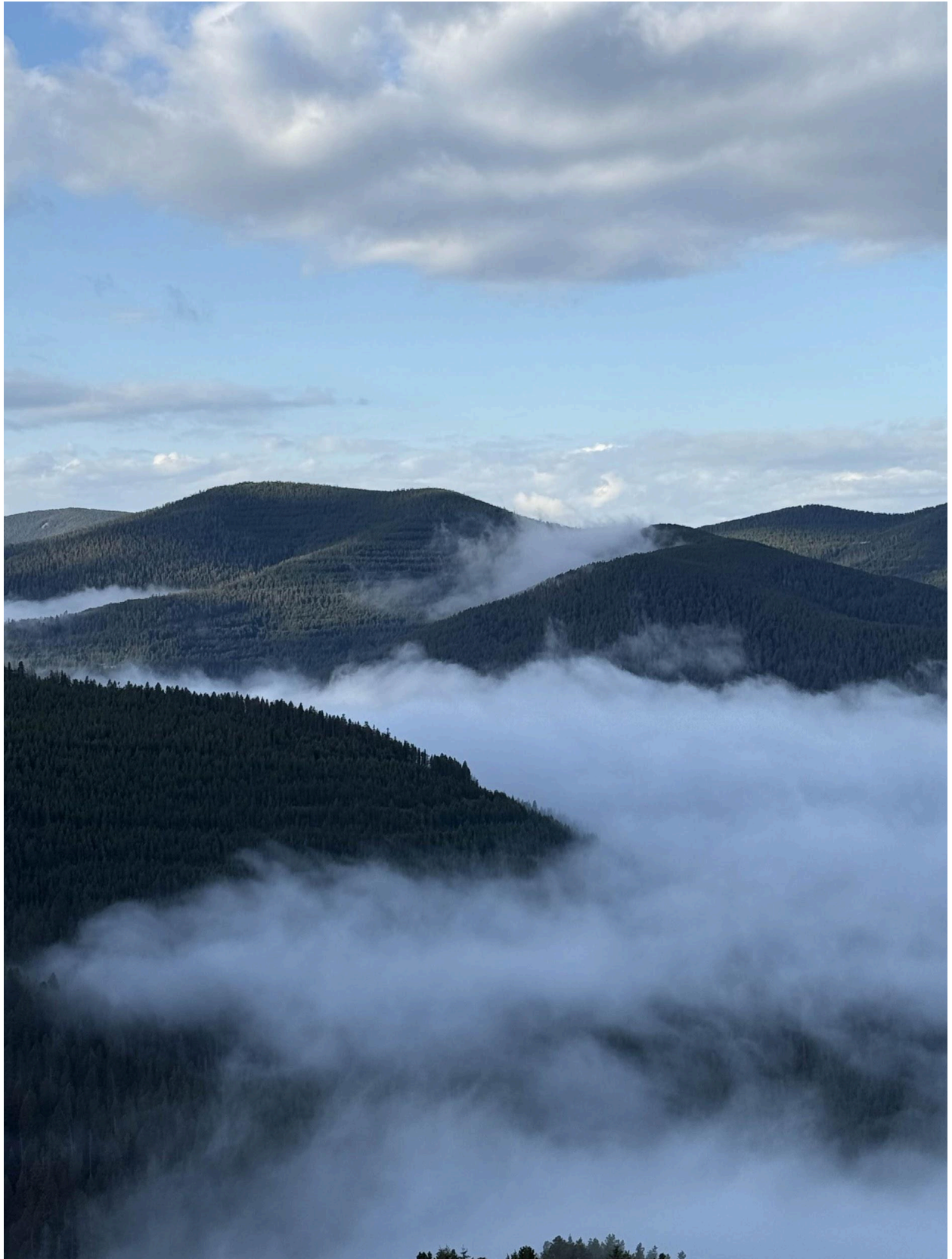
A.R.T.



(Third annual Horn Geek Week)

GREETINGS ALL!

Another stupendous year has come and gone in an instant and again I send out this humble newsletter with hopes that you still keep one eye on what is happening out there in the middle of nowhere Montana and one day your curiosity will actually get the better of you and you will have a sudden uncontrollable desire to come see for yourself (if you haven't already) this rarest of artist communities that we have built from the ground up!



(sunrise view from Molly's Meadow)

A RARE AND UNIQUE COMMUNITY INDEED (BRIEF HISTORY)

From 60 acres of raw land in the middle of the Lewis and Clark National Forest in the Little Belt Mountains of Montana purchased in 2007 a small village has sprouted. Built by hand by creative, adventurous and generous souls that decided it was worth making the trip, spending some quality time and lending some elbow grease to help grow this small village into something truly unique and beautiful.

Now 75 acres (after annexing the only adjacent private parcel) this village will give refuge, inspiration and healing energy to those same souls and to many others who will choose to make it a home away from home. Now with 12 structures (most of them cordwood masonry style) and enough cabin space to sleep up to 18 people the Refuge (as it is called) is now hosting workshops and resident artists. And we are only just getting started!





(Examples of our Cordwood Masonry using our own trees and recycled bottles)

SUMMER '25 (The Highlights)

Justin and Autumn exchanged vows in the Field of Dreams!

Having met at A.R.T. as volunteers 3 years ago and getting engaged last summer (also at Thunderhead) they decided to have a special ceremony this summer to exchange vows.

Not a dry eye within 12 miles I tell you!



And now Autumn is pregnant with a boy! Due in April so.... I'm pretty sure his unofficial middle name will be 'Thunder' or 'Thor' or something like that.

NEW ROOF ON THE WORKSHOP

Our inadvertent major project became replacing the collapsed roof on the workshop building. Record snowfall was just too much for our somewhat slap-a-dash building thrown up in 2 weeks at the very end of the summer 5 years ago. It is now well engineered and ready for anything!



Justin and Vincent

OUR GUY DAVE

I interrupt this newsletter (although this is newsworthy in and of itself) in order to take a moment to give a big shout out to a dear friend who has become a frequent (and very skilled and incredibly hard working) volunteer. Dave Goddard, (who is also known as our sherpa or our McGiver) is the guy that can do pretty much anything that needs to be done. (and sometimes the ONLY guy that can get the job done!) A family man, world traveler, retired Garmin engineer from Kansas City his work often flies under the radar but I wanted to list just a few of the things that he has done during his time with us which has spanned 4 different summers.



Dave

1) Converted the unfinished double shower house to a very cozy cabin.



2) Instrumental in helping me and Rowan get the roof on Salvador (Rowan in blue, Dave in black)



- 3) Hung a whole set of bottle lights in Poets' Cafe
- 4) Replaced the starter in my Ford Explorer (Joe helped)
- 5) Helped fix the John Deere backhoe multiple times
- 6) Keeps everyone in a good mood with an incredibly positive attitude
- 7) Helped put the roof on the addition for 'Luwdwig'
- 8) Replaced the jammed up drive belt on the mower (I literally gave up on trying to do this)
- 9) Helped install electrical lines in Poets' Cafe
- 10) Huge help with building and sheet rocking interior walls in the Poets' Cafe
- 11) Built a beautiful cabinet for a composting toilet (with the help of Uncle Terry.) (BTW the banter between these two retired {and opinionated} engineers while they are working to build a simple wooden box with doors on it from scratch is freaking hilarious)
- 12) Makes Killer Fajitas

I mean you get the idea. I could go on and on. Every retreat project needs a guy like our guy Dave!

3rd HORN WEEK A SMASHING SUCCESS!

We had a record 10 players in attendance this time with all levels and ages represented! The faculty took turns presenting on topics ranging from how nutrition can affect your performance to how to manage performance anxiety. The faculty also took turns leading the morning group warm-up which I personally found very enlightening. The week culminated with a performance in the Poet's Cafe featuring Quartets, Sextets, Octets and all 10 participants performing together. It also featured another new composition from our resident composer and artistic director Peter DelGrosso. (He has written a piece specific to the performers when he arrives all 3 years!) It also featured both of the prominent horn professors in the state of Montana. Elizabeth Schmidt (Montana State U.) and Madeleine Folkerts (University of Montana). They also both happen to be

world class performers as well and easily two of the top horn players in the whole Northwest!

The highlight of the week was definitely the short concert we gave in the tap room of our favorite brewery in Belt, the Harvest Moon Brewery. Last summer we performed unannounced but this year our good friend Rod (who runs the bar in the tap room) was able to put the word out that we were coming and the place was packed! A more appreciative and enthusiastic audience cannot be found and we all went home with free beer in our bellies and cases of free beer stacked in the back of our vehicles!!



(The tap room concert)

TWO NEW CABINS ARE NOW SLEEPING GUESTS

The double sleeping loft cabin we call Salvador (after the artist Salvador Dali) is officially open (although the bathroom still needs the shower installed and a water line run to it) and it is beautiful!



(Salvador)

The other cabin is the converted double shower that Dave converted. A cozy 1 person cabin off the beaten path, it has become an instant favorite for those that want to raise their heart rate a bit on the very dark walk home at night!

OUR 2nd YEAR HOSTING A LOCAL ARTIST IN RESIDENCE



This years' artist in residence was Great Falls resident Samantha Houston. Here she is seated in front of her gorgeous mural she painted in Hokkaido Ramen and Sushi restaurant in Great Falls. Which is also incidentally how we found her. (One of our vets Sean Cameron simply had to know who did this mural and found out she was local!!)

This is what she had to say about her stay at Thunderhead:

“When you're a busy multi-disciplinary artist and mother of two, life can be a constant barrage of sensation, noise, obligation, and self-imposed reminders that consistency of work is a blessing and to focus on what's right in front of you. Constant redirection and prioritization of energy becomes a lifeline as you juggle all of the things people say you should be grateful for. My first two days at ART were uncomfortable, not because of the people or the place but because of the absence. The absence of stimuli, the absence of need, the absence of expectation and production, the absence of definition. My everyday identity was meaningless with no formal function and no expectation to perform in all of the different areas I've carved out for myself. In the absence of defining characteristics and obligations I lacked shape and form. Slowly though, as time passed, and I allowed the calmness of the scenery to sink in, the absence filled. It filled with quiet, with verdant trees, wild flowers, and simplicity of purpose. Being at ART provided me with the space to reset my brain and my creative intake. It removed from me the distractions of daily life and the pressure of constantly performing a function. I could spend my time how I wanted and the gentleness and ease of the setting allowed my brain to relax and flow with the rhythm of nature; a state of calmness and receptivity that facilitated ideas and inspiration rising from the depths in a way that the turbulent waves of daily life would not allow. The variety of people and experiences that flowed in and out during my time at ART provided me with the kind of perspective and creative input I may not have otherwise had as their lives, adventures, skills, and passions were so different from mine. As soon as my daily life trickled away from consciousness, room was made for theirs instead and interaction enriched my experience in a way I had not anticipated.

I was deeply moved by my time at ART. I cannot recommend it enough for those who are seeking creativity, but especially for those already enmeshed and at times feeling overburdened by their creative endeavors. You probably need absence and peace more than you realize.”

Quite the photographer as well she took some amazing photos during her stay! Here are just a few of them.

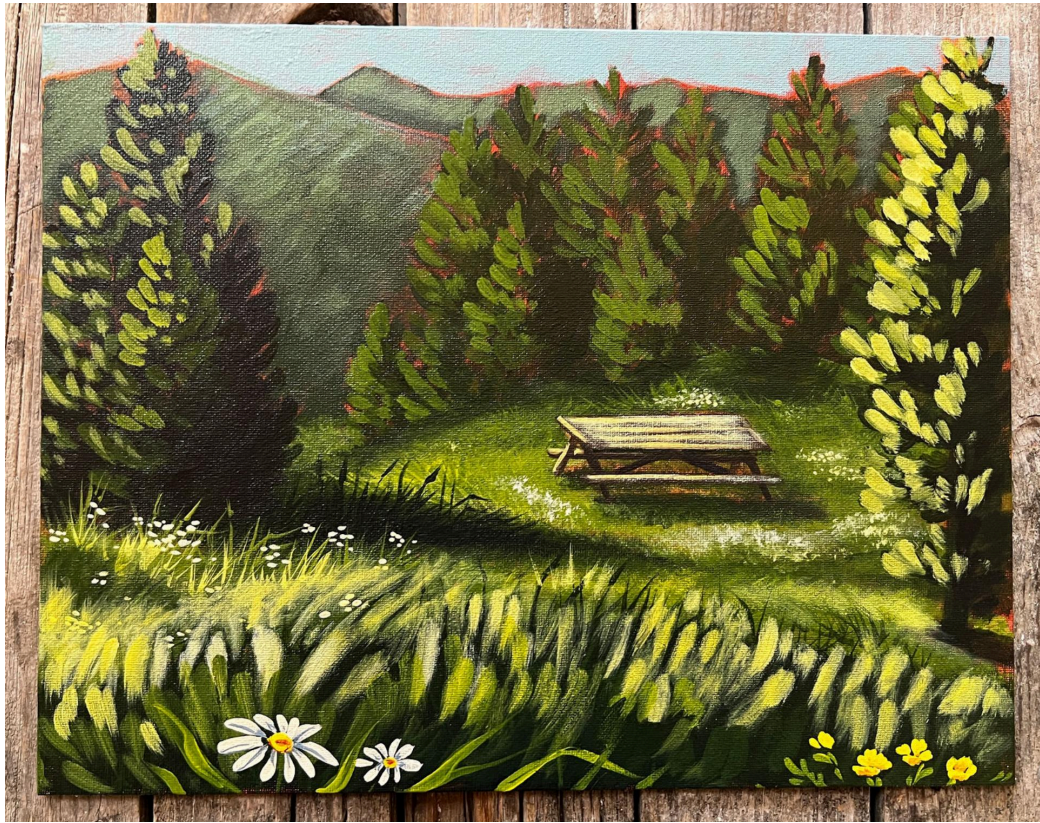




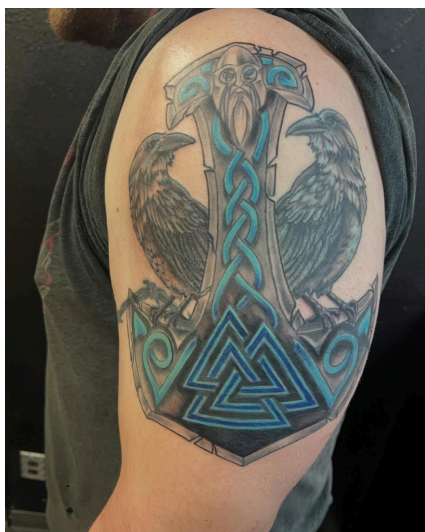
I took this one of her working.

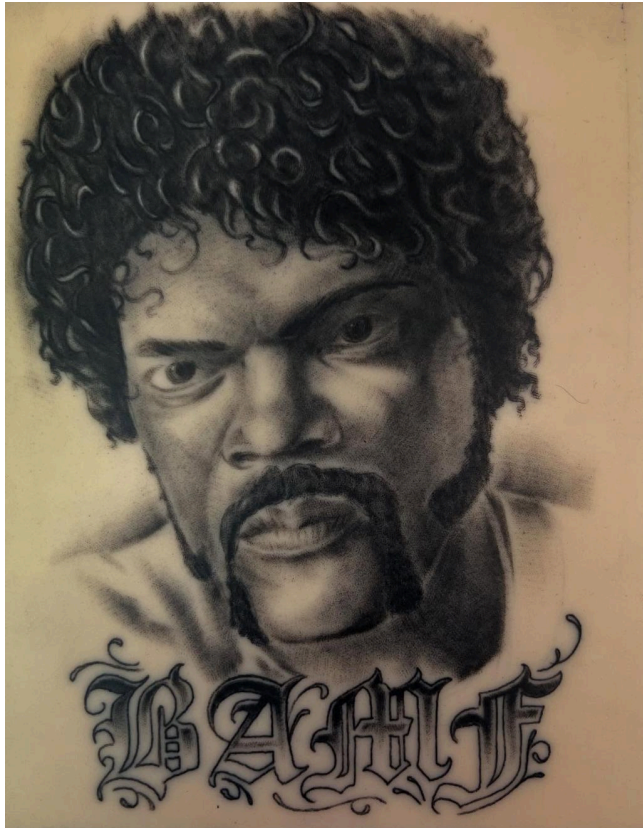


And this is a picture of one of the paintings she did at Thunderhead which she gave to us as a gift at the end of her stay. Beautiful depiction of one of our upper meadows with picnic table!



When she is not traveling around the state painting murals or working on one of her own projects, she runs a tattoo parlor called Sparrows and Arrows tattoo where she does brilliant tattoo art.





Must be Lawrence Fishburne and Barbra Streisand

She paints these cool hats too!



Here is one of her colorful paintings



It was a pleasure meeting her and hosting her. She spent much of her time in the field of dreams meadow working at an easel painting the landscape. To see more of her incredible body of work visit her instagram page [@samantahouston_art](https://www.instagram.com/samantahouston_art)

And here is link to all of the wonderful photos she took at Thunderhead!

<https://magpiephotographymt.pixieset.com/artistsrefugeatthunderhead/>

ONCE AGAIN WE TOOK A GROUP TO BRAVE THE ENTIRE SLUICE BOX CANYON



(Justin, Autumn, Brevin, Jill, Anna, Liv, Henry)

7 miles long and 14 creek crossings 8 of us made the trek through the mind blowingly beautiful Sluice Box canyon.

Some of the crossings were quite treacherous so we made a human chain to help everyone make it across safely.



Justin having a swim



lunch in the train tunnel
Always epic, always an adventure!

JILL WELDED US A BEAUTIFUL RAILING FOR THE SECOND FLOOR
OF THE POET'S CAFE

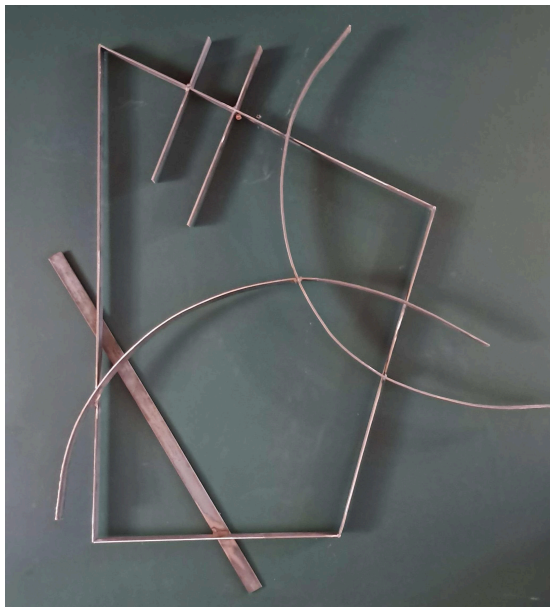


Jill Torberson from Portland, OR pictured here with her faithful assistant Yosemite Sam (or is that Brevin?) behind the very modern looking railing which matches the spiral staircase railing (which she did the summer before) and fits very nicely with her artwork on the back wall of Poet's. Check out Jill's weld art and her paintings at jilltorberson.com



Brevin Kruse from Wisconsin with his welding helmet (and not in make-up) and a good shot of the whole railing!

Nice work you two! By the way, Brevin ended his apprenticeship with Jill by welding his own beautiful art piece which now hangs in the Poets' Cafe.



THE CANADIANS BUILT US A BEAUTIFUL 2ND FLOOR DECK OUT THE FRONT OF THE POET'S CAFE!

Raphael and Vincent, two workaway volunteers from Montreal showed up last minute wanting to take a 2 week break from biking the entire continental divide trail. (!!) Yes they arrived on bicycles from Calgary! They both had mad carpentry skills and Raphael needed a real challenge I realized. I gave him a choice of several large scale projects that needed to get done and he (with the help of Vincent) basically did ALL of them! They were instrumental in helping us finish the roof on the workshop, and finishing Salvador (including putting the 2nd story windows in and building a deck out the back), and THEN Raphael designed and they both built a deck on Poet's Cafe complete with carved totem poles!! And transformed the inside of the workshop with giant shelving units and re-organized and labeled everything. All in two weeks time. It was truly incredible!



The deck at twilight



Deck began with two large tree trunks harvested from deadfall in the forest placed on poured concrete pillars.



Close-up of totem. The sketches were drawn on the poles by our artist-in-residence Samantha Houston. Raphael did the carving. His first real full scale art piece. The surroundings inspired him! He also used the branches for the railing to make it feel like a big birds nest!



Raphael putting up siding on Salvador



l. to r. Vincent, Raphael, Henry, me, and Brevin. Doing a photo ad for the Big Sky brewery. (Where we are also getting tons of free beer from thanks to frequent volunteer and now Big Sky Brewery employee Andrew Christoforo)

THE WATER LINE TRENCH IS FINALLY FINISHED! 250 FEET LONG, 6 FEET DEEP!

And my brother Joe dug it all! Although we all helped fix the backhoe when it broke down. Which it did 4 or 5 times again this summer. (It is a 1970's backhoe so what can you expect.) The water line is now laid in the trench and it might have gotten buried at the end of the summer had I not fallen and broken a rib. (That story is too sad to even tell)



Joe working his magic on the John Deere. Not sure how he even managed this last bit without falling into the trench.



Joe and the trench so deep you have to use a ladder to get in and out.

We had to dig the last turn by hand. Joe, Katie, Ann and I all took turns with this. Now we can have water year 'round in the Poet's Cafe!



One stretch of the finished trench (taken from the new deck!)

GARDEN WAS ENLARGED AND WAS BOUNTIFUL!



Early summer crew planting one of the three garden areas.



Our first snow peas! “You wanna try it?”

It was so satisfying to go to the garden and pick 6-8 different things for the evening's salad! Everything you needed including tomatoes!

All in all, what can I say to sum up the summer?

Frequent campfires that included music and poetry and stargazing (and howling coyotes!), sunsets in the hot tub, incredible hikes, scrumptious family style meals (we all take turns being the head chef!), game nites, quiet siestas taken in the meadow, ecstatic dance nites, swimming, fishing, whiffelball, art days (where we all take a break from everything and just make art) you start to get the idea of what life is like there and why life-long friendships and lasting memories that hold you over until next summer are the norm.

I've said this before but it bears repeating:

What we are growing from scratch is a new type of extended family that is beautiful, quirky, adventurous, creative, inspiring and *above all* loving and supportive. Those of us that are building this NEED it but everyone could benefit from something like this. We take pride (and get a little extra satisfaction) in knowing that we are on a mission to give the world something extra special that will survive time and transcend space.

AND best of all, you are welcome to join us!!

We urge you to consider visiting Thunderhead or come stay for a while! Out there work and play meld together rather seamlessly due to the surroundings, and the people. Just contact me if you are getting serious about coming. My e-mail is komerchristopher@gmail.com you can always call or text me at 646-784-5017.

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desire. You can become a Curious Coyote for only \$5 a month! It all adds up and keeps us growing. Here is the link:

patreon.com/user?u=81611720

There is also more info (including directions) on our website
www.thunderheadrefuge.com

That's all for now,

See you all in the Mountains!

Chris Komer
Founder/Director
The Artists' Refuge at Thunderhead



Dinner time (my favorite part of the day!)



Liv giving Henry a true bowl cut



Brevin ate a lot of carrots.



Autumn and Anna mixing mortar



Justin giving us some tunes



Jill and Brevin at work









A wall goes up



afternoon chill

