



# ‘How can we make it work?’

## Rangers Dennis Burnett and Ginny Rousseau: An Interview with Brenna Lissoway

**G**inny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett met while working as protection rangers in Yosemite Valley and were married there in 1978. Each went on to accomplished careers in the National Park Service. Often duty stationed apart, they grappled with balancing marriage, raising their children — daughter Lindsey and son Bryant — and pursuing their individual professional goals. In an interview conducted in 2014 for the ANPR Oral History Project, Burnett and Rousseau shared how they negotiated difficult decisions, adapted, compromised and persevered — asking not if, but how, they could make their complex situation work. From delivering son Bryant in a car in a snowstorm on the General’s Highway in Sequoia National Park, to alternating as the stay-at-home “house spouse,” theirs was a partnership that strove to integrate family and career. This is their story.

**BURNETT:** We’d been on the Cape [Cape Cod National Seashore] for five years. Hard place to leave. There was little promotional opportunity. So, we moved.

**ROUSSEAU:** You moved.

**BURNETT:** At least three of us did (laughs).

**ROUSSEAU:** I rented an attic apartment in Quincy, [Massachusetts], closer to the Northeast Regional office where I worked. I would drive to Delaware Water Gap on Thursday evening after work, stay until Sunday, and drive back to Boston. It was a five-and-a-half-hour drive. I would be home for four days and Lindsey would go, “Who are you?”

One of the interesting things when I was at Albright [Training Center] and Dennis was on the Cape was the kids at school told them, “Your parents are divorced because they don’t live together.” We had a child psychologist school counselor tell us: “Keep communication open. They will be just fine as long as you talk about things.” The kids wrote me letters.



*Ginny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett with their children Bryant and Lindsey*



*The couple happily retired*

Photos courtesy of Ginny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett

It was hard. We would get together with family for Thanksgiving, and they would say, “How can you abandon your children? How can you abandon your husband?”

**BURNETT:** “When are you going to get a real job?” (all laugh)

**ROUSSEAU:** A lot of family pressures and nobody around who understood what park rangers did anyway. But it was hard, looking back. I know I missed a lot. Would I have changed it? I don’t know because I wouldn’t be the person I am now if I hadn’t done what I needed to do. But there was certainly a price to pay.

**BURNETT:** But conversely, had you not taken the job, where would you be also?

**ROUSSEAU:** I get teary thinking about it.

**BURNETT:** You’re angry one way and you’re angry the other way. What’s the right thing? We did a lot of homework on this and it was not an easy decision, it really wasn’t. Overall, we computed the months, it was seven years living apart.

**LISSOWAY:** Have you talked to your kids about this? What do they say about the way that they were raised?

**ROUSSEAU:** Well, they didn’t know any different and that’s one thing, kids if they don’t know something’s supposed to be a certain way then how can they say, “Gee,

I didn’t have this.” We felt it was important to teach them life skills. When I was leaving from the Cape to go to Albright, we looked at what is it the kids have to know how to do. We wrote up directions to how to use the washer-dryer and taped them on the dryer. Bryant was so little he had to jump to see if anything was in there.

**BURNETT:** You don’t worry about the small stuff. The clean clothes pile is over here, the dirty clothes pile is over here. Shut the door.

**ROUSSEAU:** We put duvets on the quilts on the bed. To make their bed all they had to do was pull it up and their bed was made. Bryant is an excellent cook. They are both very independent. They both don’t think there is one way of doing things.

I remember we were on a trip to Hawaii when Dennis was investigating a homicide there and Bryant calls us on the cell phone and says, “How do you make pasta?” So we had to give him directions over the phone on how to make pasta. But they never felt — I think they never felt — there was one role a parent had.

It wasn’t something we did in a cavalier manner. We really tried to say, “What are the pros and cons and how can we make it work?” We really gave it a lot of thought and talked it through.

**BURNETT:** We really did. And whether it was the right decision, wrong decision, we’ll never know. It was a decision.

**LISSOWAY:** What was the highlight of you both being able to stay in the Park Service?

**BURNETT:** The mere fact that both of us were able to continue doing what we loved doing. Yes, we sacrificed, but we didn’t sacrifice what our true passion was, which was what the Park System means. It is so important to both of us.

**ROUSSEAU:** I think from the very start, when we first got married, or before we got married, we both had this passion, and we didn’t give up on it. A lot of people say, “Well gee, I had to get divorced to be a superintendent.” We just said, “How can we make it work?” I’m not saying it was easy. You know, family counseling at times and yelling matches at times. Again, it was just an extension of how we’ve lived our life.

We’ve worked it together. It’s been very satisfying. I know a number of people who have made it work because they have been happy to go to other bureaus or agencies, and that’s fine. But for us, what we had to do for ourselves was be true to ourselves — our own path. 🚗

*Ginny Rousseau and Dennis Burnett retired in 2007 and now live (together) in Flagstaff, Arizona, where they teach for Northern Arizona University’s Park Ranger Training Program.*

*Brenna Lissoway, a “park brat” and second-generation NPS employee, is the archivist for Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico.*