

## Whitewater: 'I've got a college degree, I just don't feel like using it yet,' guide Ryan Wood says

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jobs, from teaching ropes courses to stacking hay bales. Occasionally he gets to travel, and is planning a trip to Costa Rica to work at a surfing camp.

"It's a great career, making hundreds of dollars a year," he said, playfully rolling his eyes.

Wood decided on his career early on, during a trip to the Grand Canyon when he was 12. He graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a bachelor's degree in history, with an emphasis on the American West — a subject that serves him well on a river with so much history.

His mother, who lives in Placerville, is completely supportive of his current career.

"I've got a college degree, I just don't feel like using it yet," he said, although he points out that he uses his education every day on the river.

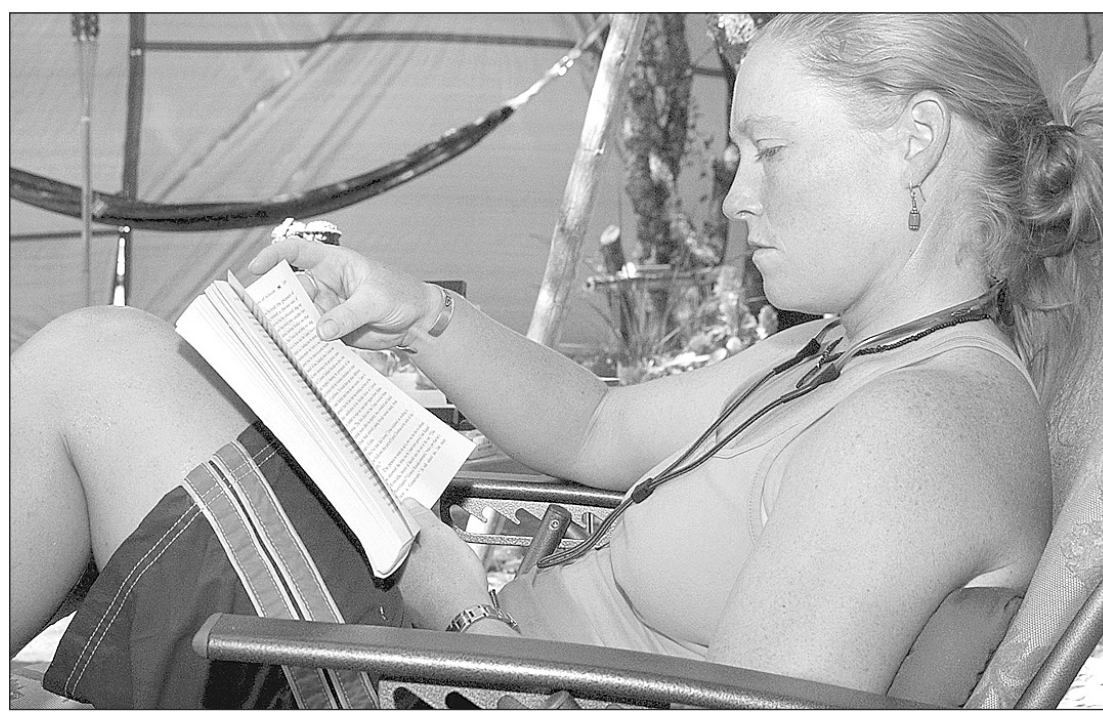
There is not much money involved in the work — although Wood argues convincingly that, being responsible for the lives of passengers, guides should get paid more — and tips from customers are his primary means of paying for food, beer and gas, he said.

Still, Wood is exactly where he wants to be. He describes what he could have done — gone to law school after college, not knowing what he wanted to do, and ended up in a job that he hated. He shakes his head at the idea.

"I get that guy on my boat five, six times a week," he said. "I'm one of the fortunate few living the dream, and that's cool. Really cool."

Wood greatly respects the river. He's not especially religious, he said, but he finds metaphors for life there.

"I'm certainly deeply spiritual when it comes to the river and nature," he said. "You get a



**LaFollette takes a break from the non-stop river guide lifestyle to read a book at her camp during her one day off. During the busy months of July and August, guides regularly work six or seven days a week. At right, LaFollette grooms her dog at her camp.**

certain balance out there."

The river that he loves takes a toll, though. He lists off his injuries, pointing to damaged body parts like an old man — broken ribs and nose, stitches on his chin and knee, bad shoulder, and a back he hurt a few days ago.

"It's really hard on your body, this job," he said. "It's like being a professional athlete. But I keep on doin' it."

Wood doesn't plan to stay a river guide forever. Eventually, he hopes to get a master's degree in family therapy, having learned how much he likes dealing with families through guiding.

But Wood's days on the river are far from over.

"I'll wait until my back gets really hurt," he says with a grin.

**"I just want to keep doing what I like to do."**

"This is my morning commute," Kris LaFollette, 34, calls over her shoulder as she

walks down a dirt trail. Her 13-year-old dog, Bayla — part husky, wolf and Australian shepherd — follows close behind.

She enters her camp, farther from the river than others for privacy, and decorated with a wind chime and meditation area. In place of a tent is her recently purchased 23-year-old trailer, which serves as a year-round home since she rarely stays in one place for long.

A six-year guide and Kentucky native with a soft twang still coloring her voice, LaFollette got her first taste of river rafting right after she graduated from college with an art degree in 1994. Her mother offered her a ticket anywhere as a graduation present, and LaFollette "wanted to come West."

During her travels she went on a three-day trip on the Salt River in Arizona and fell in love with rafting.

"It was just this fantastical thing," she said. "I remember

thinking, 'God, who gets to do this for a job?'"

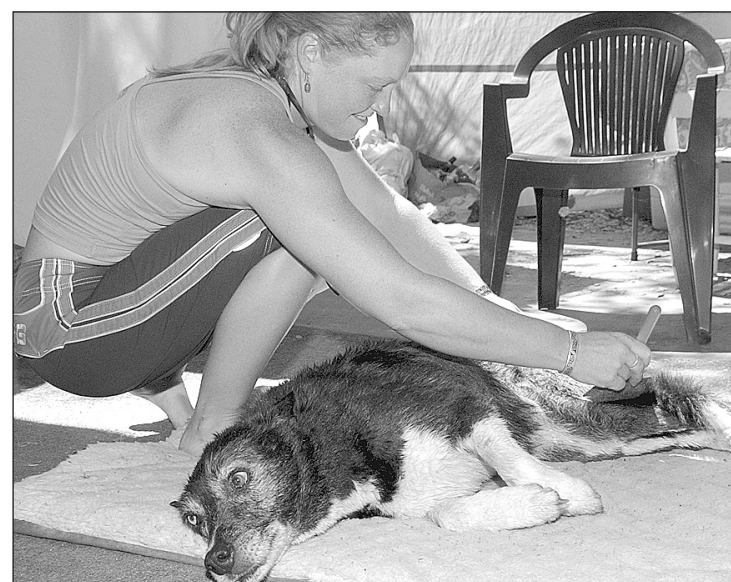
She worked a variety of jobs, including managing a hardware store in Boston, before returning home for a family illness. Then she started going over her mental list of things she wanted to do, and decided to become a river guide.

Online, she found a guide school through Friends of the River, got a job with them and left for Northern California.

"I packed up my truck — everything I could fit in — and my dog, and we just drove out here," she said.

She spent a year managing river programs for children, working at ropes courses, and guiding on her sixth and seventh day of work. In spring 2000 she came to Mariah to guide full time.

In the spring and fall LaFollette works ropes courses in Napa and in December she sells Christmas trees in Los Angeles. The rest of the time



she travels, visits family, or gets extra training.

LaFollette acknowledges that there are ups and downs to her job. Her mom is very supportive and comes to visit, but LaFollette wishes she could

river," she said.

She acknowledges the long-term downsides of the job, too. As she approaches 35 in October, LaFollette is starting to think about saving for retirement. She's considering nurs-

ing school, which would dovetail with guiding and possibly allow her to keep working on the river during the summer.

But she's having trouble finding time to fit in classes, and she's not ready to give up the river guide lifestyle — even if it means less

money.

"What the majority of the world does is works really, really hard and they get all this stuff," she said thoughtfully. "I somehow just don't buy into that; I think it's a big trick."

"I just want to keep doing what I like to do. I think that's the whole point."

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Want to get a taste of river rafting yourself? Mariah Wilderness Expeditions offers trips ranging from two hours to a whole week in various locations, including all three forks of the American River. Call (800) 462-7424, or visit [www.mariahwe.com](http://www.mariahwe.com) for more information.

Kentucky.

Guiding is a tiring career, especially during the busy months.

Guides start loading boats at 7 a.m., guide rafts of customers all day, cook dinner for the guests and don't get "off work" until around 9:30 p.m. — and then do it all again the next day.

"This time of year it's pretty much non-stop," she said. "You're just beat."

There are also job highlights, including a built-in exercise routine and the group of river enthusiasts who gather in Coloma each summer.

"When the season's in full swing, you have this great community of people on the