



Mike Blumenstein retired this fall after 31 years as a staking engineer for Klickitat PUD. His new "job" is training Piper, an energetic puppy.

Getting Power to the People

Mike Blumenstein stakes three decades of power and purpose

By Drew Myron

Mike Blumenstein won't boast.

After working 31 years as a staking engineer—a rare job in a changing field—he is more likely to talk about the enduring quality of a utility pole than to talk about himself.

“With all different types of people you meet, you gotta leave your ego at the door,” he says.

When Mike joined Klickitat Public Utility District in 1985, he says he planned to stay about three years.

He was 31 years old, a graduate of Oregon State University where he studied geography, and had been working as a land surveyor.

When he went to work at KPUD's west-end office in White Salmon, he came with unusual and coveted skills: As a licensed surveyor, Mike had knowledge of boundaries, easements and terrain.

He quickly excelled as a staking engineer, and was later promoted to assistant engineer.

When he retired this fall, he had made an accomplished career out of what he once considered a short-term job.

“I like what I do and I've been happy,” Mike says, matter-of-factly. “It's been a good way to spend a third of my life.”

Staking His Place

An engineer is the first point of contact for a new power service. When an undeveloped parcel of land is bought, for example, the engineer meets the customer on the property, determines the scope of necessary service and designs a plan to connect power in accordance with district guidelines.

In addition to designing the job, the engineer determines costs, orders materials and coordinates scheduling with the line crew and contractors.

“It's neat to be a part of providing a service that is necessary and is often taken for granted,” says Mike, who sometimes juggled 50 to 60 projects at a time. “We're getting power to people!”

Mike worked the west end of the county, serving the power needs of Bingen, White Salmon, Lyle, Dallesport, Murdock, Glenwood, Trout Lake, Husum, BZ, Gilmer, Appleton, Snowden, and the Klickitat River area from the mouth through Pitt and Skookum Flats.

“I know Mike made a difference for a lot of people building homes on the west end of the county, and they enjoyed working with him,” says Lori Froehlich, KPUD's operations support assistant.

The work of a staking engineer is complex, and the industry as a whole is having difficulty finding people to fill the jobs, says Mike.

“Few people do this work,” he says. “It's not brought up in school. Nobody knows about the work. People aren't introduced to it.”

Mike looks for aptitude and attitude, and he found it in Miquette Ihrig. For nine years, Mike was Miquette's boss and mentor.

“He had 30-plus years of experience, which means a lot of history in his memory,” says Miquette. “This means I did not have to invent the wheel again. He was very supportive of the fact that I was a woman doing a man's job. He was patient with me, and I ended up a good friend, which I value.”

A Look Back

Just a few months into retirement, Mike looks back with appreciation.

“I've worked with a lot of great people,” he says. “Linemen are a remarkable breed. They have the DNA that makes them always get the job done. The buck stops there, not on some manager's desk. They do an excellent job keeping the power flowing, and 99 percent of the time people don't even think about it. They take it for granted.”

Mike looks forward to spending time with his wife, Phyllis. The couple recently celebrated 34 years of marriage, having met in Hood River when Mike worked as a surveyor and Phyllis worked downstairs at a fabric store.

“My inspiration has been my wife,” he says. “She's one of the smartest people I know.”

In retirement, Mike will not be golfing, eating out or traveling much. He is only 62, but not ready to slow down completely.

“I'm not very good at anything,” he says, his dry humor just at the surface.

But he will be busy with a new puppy, Piper, an energetic black lab mix.

His retirement may offer a chance to reflect on his career. A great deal has changed in the three decades since Mike joined KPUD. The company experienced a major shift from paper to computer systems in the late 1990s. Line equipment has improved too, says Mike, and crews now carry handheld GPS devices. Even the work trucks have been upgraded, and now offer radios and air conditioning.

And that utility pole?

“A pole today looks like it did 30 years ago,” Mike says. “Some things are solid and still work.” ■