

[Close this window](#)

[Print this page](#)



Daily News - Miner

Forest fire inspires quirky marriage of science, art

Lorien Nettleton

Published Friday, March 21, 2008



Photo by [Eric Engman](#)

What: "In a Time of Change," a cross-discipline performance combining science and art

Who: Various local scientists, writers and performers

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Pioneer Park civic center

Mary Beth Leigh is an environmental microbiologist, and when she's not investigating bacteria that break down pollution, she thinks up modern dances.

Leigh's dance troupe, the four-member Deliquescent Designs, has adapted scientific observation of the patterns of tree-repopulation that follows forest fire into a modern dance.

This dance will be one of the many performances taking place on Friday at Pioneer Park civic center, when artists, writers, poets and scientists will gather to present

their perspectives on the ecosystem of Interior Alaska at “In a Time of Change,” a collaboration between scientists researching the ecosystems, and artists who turn to it for inspiration.

“In a Time of Change” began in September of 2007, when researchers from the U.S. Forest Service and the University of Alaska invited a collection of artists and writers to spend a day in the field, learning about the ecosystem and experiencing the unique aspects of the boreal forest.

“It’s one of the first times in Fairbanks that I am aware of where we have tried to get artists and scientists together to speak about the environment that we live in,” says Teresa Hollingsworth, Research Ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service. “In general scientists have their way of looking at the world and artists have theirs, but rarely do we combine those two views.”

The participating artists — a kind of all-star group of Alaskan thinkers, artists and writers — have taken the inspiration from that day to come up with creative expressions of Interior Alaska’s ecosystem and landscape. There will be a one-act play, a modern dance piece, a slideshow of fine art photography with accompanying haikus, musical performances by the Boreal Band, and readings of poetry and essays about Interior Alaska’s wild places. Researchers Terry Chapin and Roger Reuss will also give science talks about the region.

The artists have responded to the day in the forest fire sites in many ways. For Leigh, turning the experience into modern dance was almost a scientific one. She looked at data about the kinds of plants that repopulated the area after the burn and developed

movements with her dance ensemble based on that.

“What I like to do is use these patterns that we observe in nature using science, and use that pattern to structure a creative work,” Leigh says. In the past she has performed dance interpretations of cellular metabolism.

One member of Leigh’s dance ensemble has been developing her movement with the help of high-school students she works with in Oklahoma City.

“I was pleasantly surprised to see that there were at-risk teenage minority guys exploring the idea of mosses in Alaska through improvisation,” Leigh says.

For local playwright Anne Hanley, the experience sparked an idea for a one-act play. It’s about an encounter between an artist and an ecologist in the forest who both want something for different reasons.

Hanley says as a writer, she’s always been interested in science, and this opportunity to get information about the ecosystem from the researchers was a great opportunity for her to think more about why so many people choose to live here.

“There are easier places to live, as we all know, but for some reason we all stay here,” Hanley says. “Why are we willing to make the sacrifices that a very cold climate calls for in order to stay in this place?”

For her, the goal is to share this fondness for Interior Alaska, and have the audience respond with their own perspectives.

“Hopefully after the performance people will have a feeling of ‘Yes, that’s why I’m

here, that's why I love it here."