

BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT

# CAMP V

48





# MORE THAN A PLACE TO STAY

"It's hard to fully articulate what you are going to do, until you start doing it."

Natalie Binder



There is a children's storybook called "Roxaboxen," by Alice McLerran, about an old mining camp somewhere in the desert southwest, and the scrappy group of miner's kids that banded together in accidental friendship there, in what appeared to be the 1940s, and the fort that they

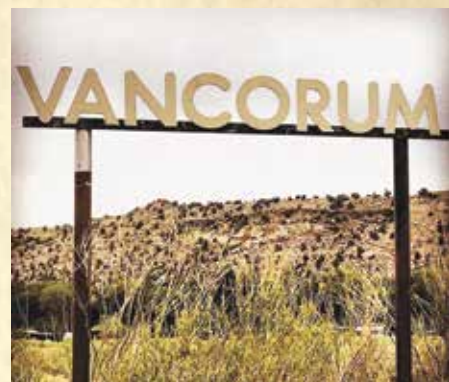
made out of rocks and boxes up on a hill, and the games of sticks and stones they would play, late into summer nights.

"It was a special place. And all children needed to go there was a long stick and a soaring imagination," the story began.

## V IS FOR VANCORUM

The old mining camp of Vancorum, perched on a flat bench of land just downstream from Naturita, is kind of like that.

Walk down the shady drive with its tidy rows of tiny cabins on either side, built in 1942 at the dawn of the West End's uranium boom, and you can imagine the generations of miner's kids that learned to ride their bikes there, the forts that they made up on the rocky hill where the old metal water tank still stands, the



swimming holes down on the San Miguel River that slides through the rimrocked canyon below.

Natalie Binder's dad was one of those kids. He spent a brief chapter of his childhood at Vancorum in one of its nicest, biggest cabins. >>>



The historic cabins at Camp V were built as company housing for the Vanadium Corporation at the dawn of the West End's uranium boom in 1942. For almost eight decades, this settlement was known as Vancorum.

(Photo courtesy of Camp V)



"The incredible history of Camp V includes Ute Indians and the miners and has served as the home to many residents of the area for over 80 years."

Natalie Binder

Because Vancorum was built to house engineers and other higher-ups in the Vanadium Mining Corporation, the locals in Naturita called it "Snob Hill." It was really nothing fancy, though. The cabins were cramped, albeit nicely finished for their time, each set in the middle of a spacious, dusty yard.

Throughout the West End's booms and busts, Vancorum stayed put on its stout foundations. In the 70s, a new owner transformed the settlement into a rental housing community. By the time Binder came along in 2017 and bought it from that longtime owner — a feisty, classy West End native named Pat Smith — the place had become a bit run down.

But Binder had a vision for the old Vancorum site.

## V IS FOR VISION

She pictured a "glampground" that paid homage to the region's rich, colorful mining roots while also tapping into the surrounding vast outdoor playground, to give the struggling West End economy a much-needed boost.

Glampers could spend their days fly fishing or stand up paddle boarding along the San Miguel River, rock climbing in steep sandstone canyons, or riding a network of mountain bike trails developed by the West End Trail Alliance. At night, they could gather around communal campfires to share stories and ideas under dazzling starry skies, before turning in for the night in a cozy remodeled cabin, or a swank safari tent, or a vintage Airstream trailer, or a hammock swinging in the breeze down by the river.

She would call this place "Camp V."

Three years later, Binder's vision is about to become a reality, with the cabins stripped back to their studs to await remodeling, a "magic school bus" that

doubles as the check-in lobby and gift shop, intriguing art installations made of repurposed junk, and a primitive car-camping and van-camping area down by the river already open for business, complete with a newly hired, local Naturitan campground host.

"The incredible history of Camp V includes Ute Indians and the miners and has served as the home to many residents of the area for over 80 years," Binder said. "We take huge responsibility in retelling these rich stories and allowing them to unfold through design and art."



The wild rimrock canyon country of the West End beckons to growing numbers of outdoor enthusiasts.  
(Photo courtesy of Camp V)



## V IS FOR VOCATION

Binder is perhaps the only person on the planet with the unique set of qualifications to pull this off.

For one thing, both sides of Binder's family are from this very area. Her grand-

mother on her mom's side used to be the Montrose County Judge, and is now the interim superintendent for the Norwood School District.

Her grandmother on her dad's side was the secretary to the president of Vanadium Corporation, a big deal for a

woman at that time. The family lived at Vancorum briefly in the 1960s while they were renovating their house in Naturita — the old Blake Street Inn right next to the Dollar Store.

"And next to that was Binder's Texaco, which was where all the miners hung out and it was a bar," Binder explained. "It was the social center of town."

Her dad left Naturita in the 80s when the uranium mines closed down. Binder was born and raised in Green River, a Wyoming mining town. The economy of the West End had started to decline by then, but her family returned many times over the years to hunt and spend time on the land.

"I always thought I'd like to live in Telluride, but struggled with the feeling that it was not a real place," Binder said. Nevertheless, that's where she ended up settling, building a flourishing career in luxury hospitality, buying a home and getting elected to the Mountain Village town council. Along the way, she earned a master's degree in construction management.

Binder had been in Telluride for 19 years when Vancorum came on the market. She had been thinking about launching a "little glamping project," she said, and this seemed like the perfect place to do it. She talked it over with her family. Everyone told her she was absolutely crazy.

But Binder couldn't shake her dream.

At the same time, her close friends Bruce and Jodie Wright, who own One Architects in Telluride, were also looking for a project that offered a bigger canvas than what they could experiment with in Telluride's heavily regulated box canyon.

They decided to partner up. "I think we always knew we were going to do something together, but we weren't entirely sure what that would be," Binder said. "It turned out to be Camp V."

## V IS FOR VENTURE ACCELERATOR

A year or so after buying the historic core of the Vancorum property, as Binder was going through the permitting process with Montrose County and looking for investors to help fund the development of the project, Telluride Foundation president Paul Major approached her and said, "We'd love for you to participate in the Telluride Venture Accelerator." >>>





Binder knew a little bit about TVA, but it had never occurred to her that Camp V would be a good fit for the program, since it was, at its core, a real estate investment — “not some new kind of earbuds or something like that.”

“You are absolutely a fit,” Major assured Binder, giving her a much-needed boost of confidence. Major explained that as part of its Stronger Neighbors Initiative, the Telluride Foundation was deeply committed to supporting innovative economic development in the West End, and had in fact just helped get Nucla and Naturita designated as a federal Opportunity Zone, giving huge tax breaks to potential real estate investors.

Binder was still busy with her full-time job at that time, but decided to get on board with TVA. First, she attended a few potluck founder dinners with other entrepreneurs who had gotten funded or mentored through the program. Over beers, they shared their stories.

“Everybody was like, ‘Oh my gosh,

we love what you are doing and we can’t wait to go there,’” Binder said. It was another huge confidence builder. And Binder came to realize, “I do have a good idea. And it deserves to happen. And I deserve to be funded just as much as they do.”

### V IS FOR VOICE

Binder’s mentors at TVA told her that the most important thing for her to tackle was her fear of public speaking.

They worked obsessively with her on her pitch for Camp V.

“It was so helpful and so amazing to have their feedback and input,” Binder said. “Really getting up in front of all the other entrepreneurs and doing it over and over and over again. Everybody gave each other feedback. It all felt very safe.”

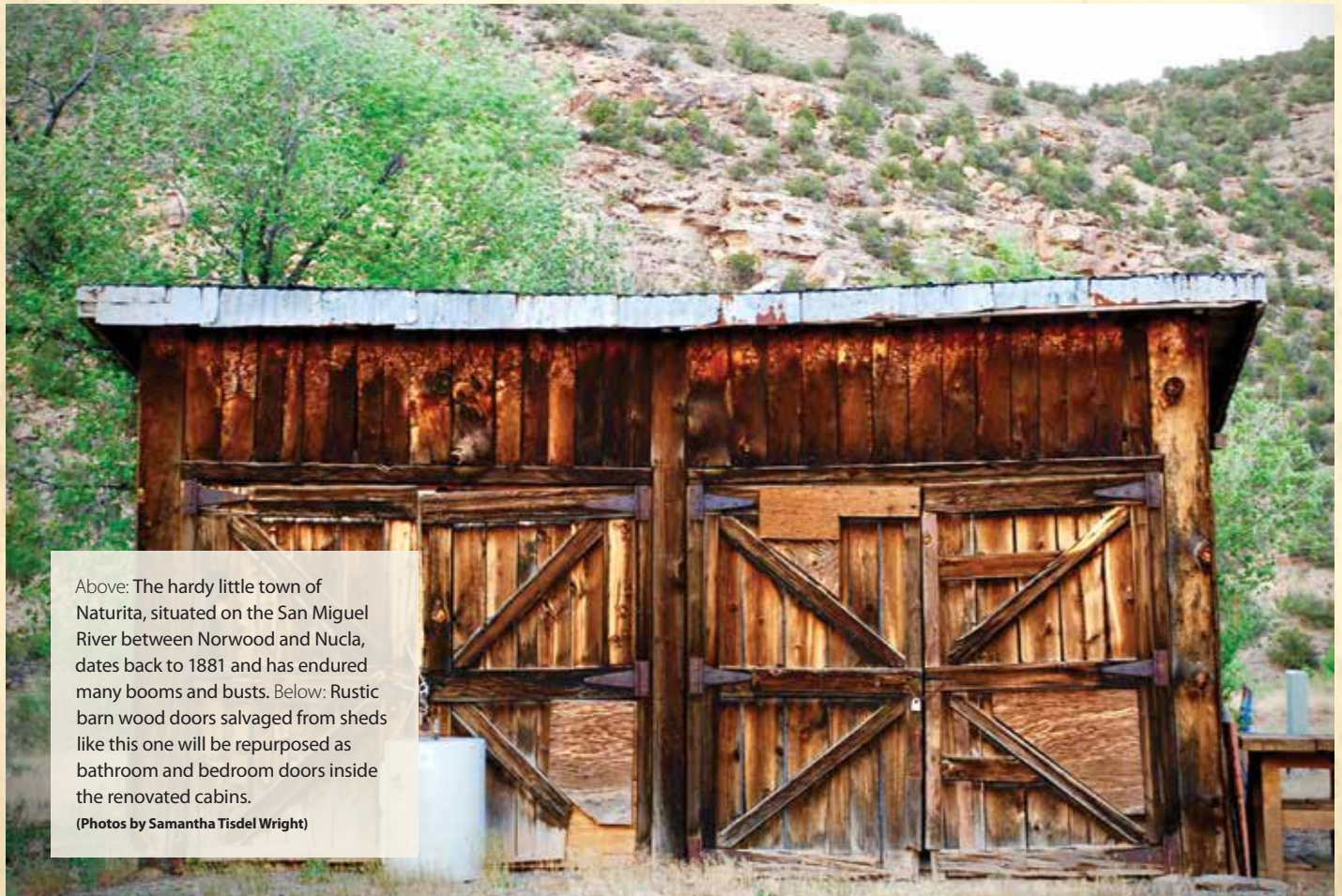
Finally, she presented her project at an angel-investor event in Telluride. Her well-honed pitch was a hit. She had a ton of people coming up to her after-



wards who said, “Let’s talk.” Among them was Shawn Bertini, an investor with a private real estate investment firm in Steamboat Springs called Four Points Funding that specializes in funding Opportunity Zone projects.

Bertini and some fellow investors came to Naturita a week or so later to look over the Camp V site with Binder. “They actually camped down on the property. They really wanted to feel it. And, they had some great ideas, some things that we hadn’t thought about,” Binder said.

Bertini caught Binder’s vision, and agreed that it was definitely the right idea, in the right place, at the right time, what with the whole “glamping” and “van life” thing catching on, the mountain biking



Above: The hardy little town of Naturita, situated on the San Miguel River between Norwood and Nucla, dates back to 1881 and has endured many booms and busts. Below: Rustic barn wood doors salvaged from sheds like this one will be repurposed as bathroom and bedroom doors inside the renovated cabins.

(Photos by Samantha Tisdal Wright)



trail development underway in the West End, and with Moab both so close, and so overcrowded.

They signed a letter of intent, worked through all of the other details, “and then it grew...five times bigger,” Binder said, both in funding, and in size. “They were the ones that encouraged us to go bigger because if you are going to have these fixed costs like the water system and all that stuff, from a money perspective, it makes sense.”

That was in July of last year. By December, funding intact, she’d quit her day job to work on Camp V full time.

### V IS FOR MOVEMENT

The project moved forward at warp speed. By mid-June of this year, the last of the old Vancorum tenants had moved out, and all but one of the cabins had been stripped back to the studs, and treated to new plumbing, electricity, windows and doors.

Camp V was fast emerging from a warm and fuzzy dream state into crisp, HD reality. It was the perfect time to check in for an update with Binder and her partner in grime, Jodie Wright.

“We’re basically garbage-picking at this point,” laughed Wright. “We’re taking everyone else’s garbage and moving it to Camp V.”

On this very day, for example, a batch of astroturf had made its way from the Telluride Transfer House to the old Vancorum ball field, and some insanely enormous pieces of metal “junk” salvaged from the decommissioned Tri-State coal-fired power plant in nearby Nucla had been repositioned down by the river as an art installation.

“We like the idea that Tri-State Power was once part of the West End’s boom and then part of the bust as well,” Wright said. “We’re going to take some of those parts and pieces to repurpose them, and put the history back in a different way.”

### V IS FOR VIRUS

In other words, things are coming along nicely.

As with any big construction project, though, there have been plenty of unexpected challenges along the way for Binder and Wright. For example, it was surprisingly hard to find a good plumber to work on the cabins at Camp V, because all of the subcontractors in the region tend to get sucked into much bigger, high-dollar projects around Telluride, 50-some miles to the east.

“We kept calling around and we couldn’t find somebody that was interested,” Wright said. Then along came Covid-19, and suddenly all of those big job sites in Telluride were shut down.

“Pallante Plumbing called us and said, ‘Hey, we’d love to keep our guys working,’ and they came. And now, the plumbing is done,” Wright said.

Camp V proved to be an ideally-suited pandemic construction site. >>>



The historic cabin exteriors will remain as authentic as possible while the interiors have been stripped back to the studs to create a more spacious, modern feeling inside.

(Photo courtesy of Camp V)



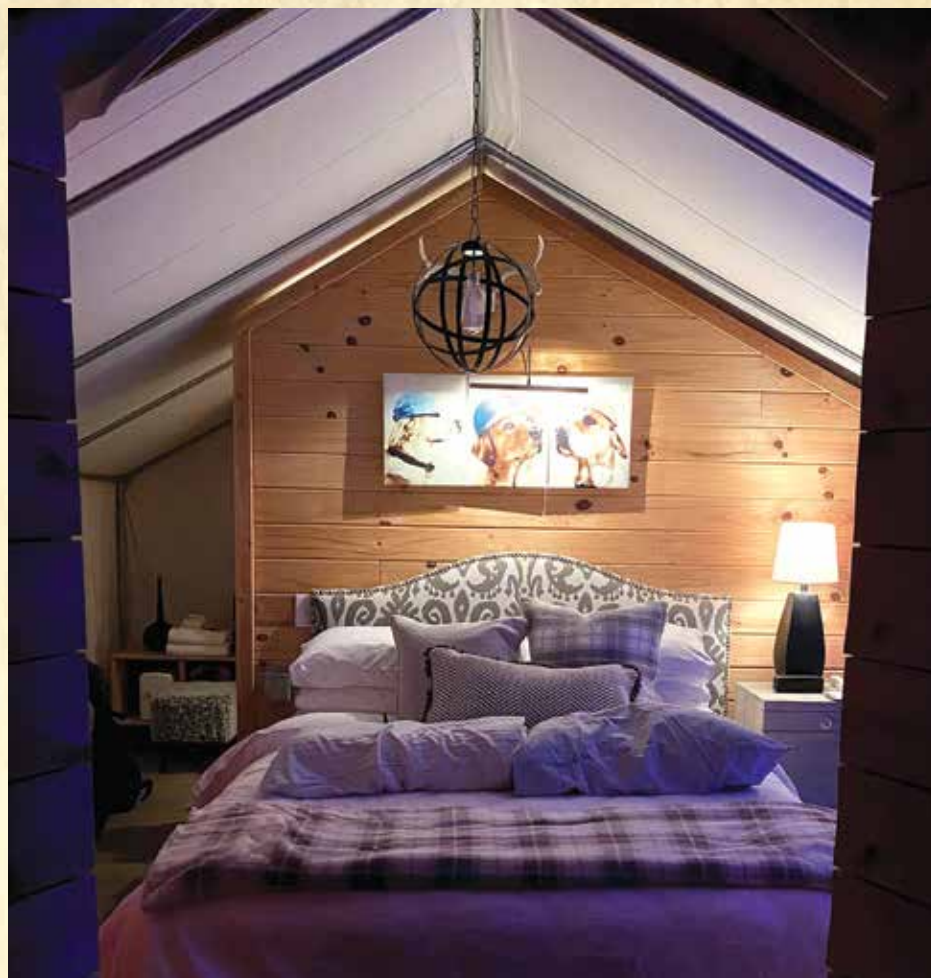
Wright and Binder's development research took them to this "glamping" setup in Virgin, Utah. Glamping, a portmanteau of "glamorous" and "camping," is a way to experience untamed and completely unique parts of the world such as the remote West End, without having to sacrifice creature comforts. (Photo courtesy of Camp V)

"Since day one, social distancing was easy for us," Wright said. "There's, like, one man working in each cabin. The cabins are 100 or 200 feet apart. And if we're not inside of a cabin doing something, we're standing outside. So it's naturally set up to be Covid-ready. It's one of those things you never could have predicted."

The coronavirus brought another unanticipated silver lining, when waves of Telluridians opted for "staycation" adventures in the West End this spring, instead of typical spring break trips to Costa Rica and other more exotic locales.

"For the first time in my 20 years in Telluride, so many of my friends were coming down here recreating and really appreciating this community for what it has to offer, instead of driving through it on the way to Moab," Binder said. "That was really heartwarming for us to see. And that's exactly what we're trying to cultivate, is those connections."

Thanks to the coronavirus, Binder said, "We've already got new West End fans that are ready for us to open."



## V IS FOR RENOVATE

Physically and spiritually, the cabin renovations are at the core of the Camp V project, so it was super-important for Binder and Wright to get them right. "The cabins are inspiring, just because of how much history they embody," Wright explained.

Not much had been done with them since the 70s except occasional repairs, "So they absolutely needed TLC to take them from their past into today," Wright said. "Part of what I do professionally is shepherd cool old buildings into their new life and into the future. That was what was called upon for us here."

It took a lot of powwows about what the property was going to be, and how it was going to work, to zero in on their final vision. Finally, they decided to preserve each structure's rustic exterior to the greatest extent possible, while tearing out the cramped, dated 'guts' in order to transform the interior and give each cabin a fresh, open, updated look.

Now that they're into the bones of the buildings, "It's just so much fun," Wright said. "They're so small, and they're so accessible. They're like little bite-sized bonbons, and there's so many potentials and so many possibilities."

The original wood flooring in each cabin will remain intact, complete with faintly traced footprints of 'ghost' walls that used to be there and divide the space. "We're not trying to eliminate the history," Wright said. "We're rewriting it in a way that I think people will still be able to imagine how things used to be."

In honor of that history, shed doors that were salvaged from old structures on the Vancorum property will get repurposed within the cabins as bathroom doors in the studio units, and as bedroom doors in the two bedroom units.

They also plan to add in cool modern amenities like custom concrete-and-steel sinks designed by the Durango company Counter Culture, gas fireplaces, and a custom line of antequy, distressed furniture created just for Camp V by Salt Lake City furniture designer Michael Hennessy.

"It's pretty special," Wright said. "People come up here who have lived here

50 years ago and are like, 'Wow, I cannot believe these cabins are still standing, and I can't believe how you're going to change them.'

## V IS FOR EVOLUTION

The new custom furniture line is a perfect example of how quickly Camp V has evolved from idea to reality.

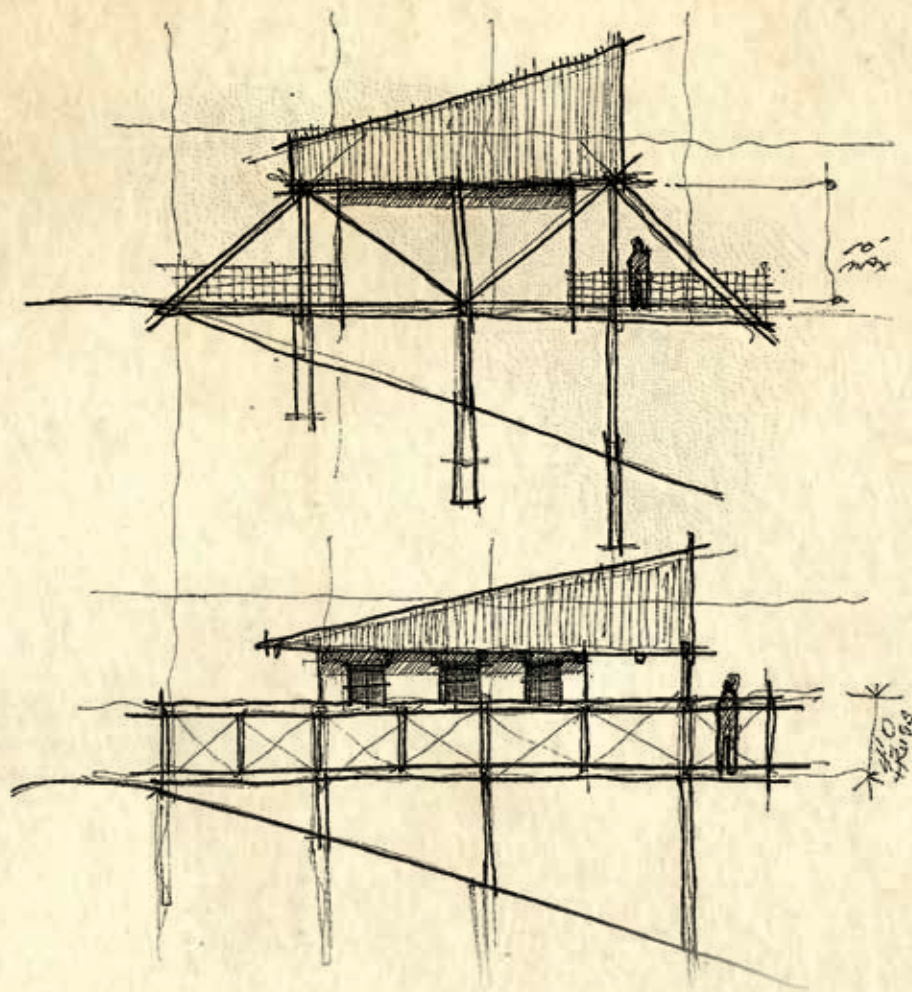
Binder and Wright serendipitously learned of Hennessy's work, which is showcased through his company, Blackhouse Textiles. They loved it. Hennessy loved what they were doing, too. So much so, that he jumped in his car and drove straight to Camp V to meet them.

"Now, we are talking about finalizing a crate (of furniture)," Binder said, just seven days later. "And we're gonna have that done by next week. It was kismet, very much like what has happened with this entire project. We could drag it on forever," she said, "but all of our personas



Above: Design elements at Camp V, sketched by Jodie Wright of One Architects.

Below: The historic water tanks on the hillside above Camp V loom like ancient beings, quietly watching over the evolution of the settlement down below. (Photos courtesy of Camp V)



lend to wanting to see evolution. Right now. And you see the evolution pretty quickly, obviously, when you make decisions and give people clear direction.”

### V IS FOR CREATIVE

As an architect in wealthy Telluride, Wright has become accustomed to working on projects where money is no object. At Camp V, however, her favorite word is “budget.”

It gives her a constraint to work within, which has fostered a surprising amount of creativity.

“If I had to give it an analogy, I would say redesigning one of our cabins is like trying to find the best \$15 bottle of wine,” she said. “You can’t spend as much as you want to. You’ve got 10 or 15 bucks in your pocket, and you want it to just be the best. But in this case, you’re finding that \$15 bottle that gets 98 points.”

Both Wright and Binder acknowledge that the process of working within a budget has been challenging. “But it has also been a lot of fun, and I think it’s pushed all of us to be really creative,” Binder said. “We’re having to really think about it and be really thoughtful.”

### V IS FOR LOVE

The office Binder and Wright share at Camp V is set up in the only remaining cabin that has yet to be gutted. Inside, there is a hand-painted message on the wall that reads, “Camp V is more than a place to stay,” and a hand-drawn map of what Camp V will one day look like — complete with art gardens and Hammock Town and Fun Island — and a white board filled with a million neatly written to-dos.

That’s also part of the fun.

“We’re all ‘get ‘er done’ people,” Wright said. “We’re scrappy and try to figure it

out. There’s no paralysis, or weight of a decision. I feel like we fill each other’s gaps. We are all super-capable. We’re a pretty solid pie chart of skills.”

More importantly, Binder said, “We are having a blast. We are working our asses off. We are loving it here. We are loving this community.”

And so far, Naturita’s community appears to love them back.

“We want to create a place where people start having a different conversation about the West End,” Binder said. “I want other entrepreneurs to come here, and artists, and outdoor people, and say ‘Yeah this is it.’”

### V IS FOR SAVE

A few nights later, Binder lights a campfire at Camp V, and considers the tidy rows of old Vancorum cabins — neatly numbered, freshly gutted, and plumbed, and wired, almost ready to greet a new generation of guests to stay and play in the West End.

Down on the river, some friends from Telluride have come in to camp for the night. They ride their bikes across the old ball field, and bang on the old crooked water tank up on the hill. The big sky flares and darkens, and the tawny rim-rock country softens into a dream.

“I think that is why so many people have hung on here for so long,” Binder says. “They are like, ‘Where else would I live? This place is amazing. This is my home. It deserves to be saved.’”

