

Clevelands giving back with \$1M pledge

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SARONA—When busloads of children arrive at Hunt Hill Audubon Sanctuary for a week's stay at the 600-acre nature center, they drop their phones in a basket, relieved of their electronics so they can immerse themselves in nature, sometimes for the first time.

“When they leave,” said Carolyn Cleveland, president of Hunt Hill's board, “I think the most amazing thing is they've learned to look up, they've learned to see things, to listen. And when they get back on that bus, they don't need their phones. They say, ‘I'll get it later.’ We're making them aware.”

It is to help ensure those kinds of transformational experiences continue that Carolyn and Dave Cleveland of the town of Madge have pledged a \$1 million match to Hunt Hill. They will match every dollar donated to Hunt Hill as part of the match campaign, through 2019.

“We are doing this to support efforts to protect natural Wisconsin habitats, offer nature programming to all ages, and provide a sanctuary accessible to all,” they said. “Hunt Hill is a gem in our community where everyone can go to find solitude in nature.”

The combination of the donations and the match will go into an endowment that will help fund operating costs, enable Hunt Hill to expand programming, maintain and improve its aging buildings, and allow the sanctuary to give programs year round.

It was not long after the Clevelands moved to the Northwoods in 2002 from the Twin Cities area that they felt the pull of Hunt Hill. Their background naturally led them to be backers of the unique sanctuary.

Carolyn had been involved in fundraising in Minneapolis, mainly in education and the arts. Though they had lived in the heart of the city, she loves camping and the outdoors, and her family often used to spend time at a cabin.

They received an invitation to visit Hunt Hill, and Executive Director Storme Nelson “gave this compelling talk that night and the next day I called the office and said, ‘I'd like to be on your board,’” Carolyn said.

“Probably the first one that ever did that,” Dave joked. “He was really fascinating.”

“This was where I fit,” Carolyn said.

She was intrigued with raising funds to ensure the programming continued so children could learn about their surroundings.

“I also as an adult needed to learn about preserving what we had here,” she said. “So then I started going to classes there. So what it came down to was there was the desire, the want, to really know and help and encourage others to do the same thing.”

Dave said both of them had lived busy lives in the city, with a high percentage of their time devoted to charities and their church. He especially had been raised with a sense of service, with his father a minister.

“As a banker, I was expected to be a volunteer,” Dave said, recalling his work at U.S. Bank. He was a member of the Jaycees and Lions groups, and was president of Lions and chambers of commerce in different towns moves with bank. “That was part of the job in banking, to be a volunteer. Be on church boards, be on hospital

boards, school boards. That's part of what we did, all of us. Over the years, I expected all of my people to volunteer."

It was a way to be leaders, to give back, and to get acquainted with people in the community, he said. "We always felt our employees grew as people. They were better officers over the years as they gave of themselves and realized the importance of giving, not only of their money but giving of their time."

For Carolyn, who did not grow up with an emphasis on volunteerism, it became more a part of her when they married and it was integrated into their lifestyle.

"I just feel better when I can do something for somebody," she said.

Donation

"Giving away money is one of the greatest things you can do," Dave said. "For most people who spend time in philanthropy, it's not making the money that's so much fun, it's giving it away. How is that possible? All I can tell you is that it is."

"It's a good feeling," Carolyn said.

At one time the National Audubon Society had planned to close Hunt Hill, and volunteers asked for time to make it a viable camp again.

"There have been 80 board members that have held this organization together for the last 30 years," Carolyn said.

"To me that's just awe-inspiring," Dave said.

Volunteering can be a lot of work, he said, and beyond that, they have the weight of keeping the organization going financially.

"Our board isn't just a decision-making board," Carolyn said. "It's a hands-on board."

A board member may be found as readily out painting one of the buildings as sitting at the table going over the budget or suggesting ideas for programming.

"To think that without them, it wouldn't even be there today," Dave said. "Thirty years later, with volunteer labor, they've held it together is the principle reason I decided to make this gift. Because I understand what it's like to be that kind of volunteer.

"The principal reason I'm doing this is that I want to honor those people that have held it together so we have something to pass on to future generations," he said. "With this kind of a deal with the \$2 million, that will always be safe, only the earnings will be spent, this should go on forever and ever.

"The gift that we're giving, while it's got a few zeros attached to it, it's not nearly as important as holding it together for 30 years with volunteers."

"Our volunteers are so dedicated," Carolyn said. "They really want to see it grow. They love programs."

Recent additions of winter programming is helping turn Hunt Hill into a four-season center rather than fair-weather one. From offering lunches where soup is ladled out with nature presentations to moonlit snowshoeing, Hunt Hill is working toward being a destination year round.

While Hunt Hill is well-known in the area, the board is working to spread the word to a wider audience, to let them know that its diverse habitats and events are open to everyone.

“We’ve got the bogs, and the trails, the space we have – 600 acres – it’s just open to everybody,” Carolyn said. “It’s free.”

Only 40 percent of the sanctuary’s funding is from the programming.

“The rest, we have to raise,” Carolyn said. “There are some grants out there, but we have to work to get those grants and keep them up. It’s up to us.”

The \$2 million “will guarantee the sustainability of that gem in this community,” Dave said. “Forever. And out of that, I’d like to see the nature center grow and see things expanded annually. But before we can do all of that we have to make sure we can pay the bills.”

He estimates that the earnings on the professionally managed fund should net an average 5 percent, approximately \$100,000 a year, and sometimes perhaps half-again that amount.

“That will more than take care of the operational costs, and it will give us some money to start planning some of these physical improvements that we need,” Dave said. “This is something that now can be realized over time if we have the monies coming in for the things that come up.”

The Clevelands recognize that it will not be easy to raise a million dollars, so the match campaign will run three years. All of the board members pledged donations before the official campaign was launched and now are concentrating on spreading the word about the treasure Hunt Hill is and about the learning and deep connections forged there with nature and with Hunt Hill itself.

“We have to invite people there,” Carolyn said. “People don’t really realize how cool it is until they go there.”

She said it is important not only to preserve Hunt Hill for the future’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren and beyond, but so that people can learn more about taking care of nature – and their own property, too.

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