

BY Christina Soto



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Board members of all-volunteer land trusts forge strong bonds with their communities

"There are big differences between us and staffed land trusts," says Shelly Tichy, president of the all-volunteer Westmoreland Conservancy in Murrysville, Pennsylvania.

"We do everything from our homes except when the board meets at the community library. Everything that we accomplish is a feat because it entails people working together who are not in an office. We do the work in our spare time. We have to coordinate busy schedules. You can see why we can't get upset and we can't give absolute deadlines. We have to be flexible."

Shelly Tichy and the other two board members profiled below are part of the group of land trust board members in the country, 15,000 strong. But they are also part of a unique subset: those who run a land trust without staff. Of the 1,699 state and local land trusts included in the 2010 Land Trust Census, 914 reported no full-time or part-time staff, indicating that 54% of the land trusts in America are run entirely by volunteers.

Despite very concrete differences, though, staffed and all-volunteer land trusts share a deep bond to the communities in which they save land. Otherwise, they could not do what they do.

“The bulk of our membership is local,” says Shelly. “The municipality is working for the same goal as we are. We’re all interwoven. We want the best community that we can possibly create.”

Shelly Tichy

Shelly comes by her love of nature through her grandparents. “I was born in Detroit and grew up in cities, but my grandparents had a cottage on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The first time I ever saw a wild orchid was up there,” says Shelly. “There was so much beauty I didn’t see in the city.”

Her immediate involvement with Westmoreland Conservancy came about because the land directly across the street from her home in Pennsylvania, a target for development, was gifted to the conservancy. “That was what got me involved at the level I’m at now.”

In her fourth year as president (and her tenth on the board), Shelly says, “I’m very fortunate because the board that is seated right now is one of the most dynamic groups I’ve ever worked with, either in a professional or volunteer setting.”

Most people in her community, though, know Shelly from her years of teaching ballroom dancing. “I just retired after 30 years of teaching, 20 in this area. My competitive ‘Dancing with the Stars’ days are way past,” she says with a laugh.

She also volunteers at the assisted living facility where her grandmother lived. “I created a music and memory program that I’ve been doing for 10 years now,” says Shelly. “I bring tambourines, maracas and bells that the residents can make joyful noise with. I create CDs out of my collection of songs I think they will remember. I’ll play something like ‘Que Sera Sera,’ and as soon as the song is over, I ask who sang it, what movie it’s from, who directed the movie, and so on.”

She tells about one person in particular who had stopped communicating because of Alzheimer’s. “One day I played a particular song, and she sang it with me! It was ‘I Love you Baby’ by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. The experience heals me every bit as much as it heals them.”

She also knows how healing nature can be to her community, and will stand up to those who threaten it. “We’re right in the heart of a lot of drilling. There’s a



Shelly Tichy, at right, poses with Katie Blackmore, then vice president of Westmoreland Conservancy, at Rally 2009 in Portland, Oregon. She says the sunglasses hid her terror. “A ski lift? Are you nuts?? I hate heights!”

tremendous amount of controversy over ‘fracking’ right now.” Shelly admits to a bit of stealth when attending the meetings of the drilling company. “I walk in wearing 5” stiletto heels, a short skirt and a long leather coat. They don’t connect me to the conservancy right away. I’m not looking like ‘nature girl.’” What’s important, she says, is that Westmoreland Conservancy’s properties provide a buffer to some of the drilling.

“By preserving green space we give people a place for recreation. We hold an annual ‘Caching with the Conservancy’ event to draw people to the land. We joined up with the municipality to create a five-mile trail that crosses Murrysville from east to west. It took 17 years of planning and acquiring key properties. Don Harrison, a former president, got the ball rolling when he went up in a plane and could see a corridor that could be preserved. The Don Harrison Community Trail opened last June.”

If asked four years ago when she thought would be an appropriate time to hire staff, Shelly says she might have said “soon.” She has changed her mind. “I have a tremendous board that works very well together. When you have people who are passionate about the same thing, you don’t need staff. It might be nice, it might take some load off of us, but that’s not who we are.”

Bill Lindemann

“In a state where 94% of all land is privately owned, protecting land often remains a poorly known concept,” says Bill Lindemann, president of the Hill Country Land Trust in Texas. “Remedies include education,

Bill Lindemann told the writer, "I wish you could have profiled all of our board members. Volunteers, especially those working in land conservation, are incredible people doing what they can to make a difference in our communities, regions, states and nation. Thanks for giving us recognition and making us proud."



following leads and making contacts. The land trust must first promote its mission in the community, and then convince landowners that land conservation is a worthwhile undertaking."

Bill grew up on a small Texas farm where he connected with the land and its wildlife—birds, mammals and wildflowers. "I was the first in my family to go to college," he says. "I studied geology and spent 32 years as an exploration geologist traveling to all corners of our planet."

His travels took him to places where land and wildlife were cherished, and places where they were not. "I saw dramatic examples of what can happen to ecosystems when conservation values are not respected."

After retiring, Bill moved to the biologically diverse Texas Hill Country. "I had time to pursue becoming a naturalist, learning about wildlife and using that information to educate others about conserving our natural heritage."

"Volunteers are incredible people doing what they can to make a difference in our communities, regions, states and nation."

He also became a writer. As a weekly newspaper columnist, he's been able to share his passion about birding. "After 15 years of writing, I still have not run out of topics to share with my readers!"

When the local tourist bureau asked him to write a piece for their website to attract birders to the Hill Country, "I realized that there were no local designated, accessible places for birders to find interesting birds. I began a process to develop a nature center in Fredericksburg that could be used as an education opportunity to promote not only birds, but also the Hill Country's great diversity of wildlife."

With the help of many friends, Bill developed a nature area in the Lady Bird Johnson Municipal Park on a portion that had been described as "waste property." Twelve years later, the nature area is a top draw to the park, with over

250 species of wildflowers and 174 species of birds found on the 15 acres.

In 2003, Bill was asked to join the Hill Country Land Trust. The all-volunteer organization serves 19 counties and has conserved more than 4,800 acres with 16 donated conservation easements. "We have a very dedicated board of directors," he says.

The Hill Country community is under intense development pressure as more and more people (retirees and visitors) want to live in a scenic and culturally interesting part of the state. The land trust offers landowners a way to conserve their land through donated easements. "Having local, respected community members on the board gives us credibility in promoting land conservation," says Bill. "Communities are often looking for ways to promote their economies; however, this can impact land, water and wildlife resources both positively and negatively. A land trust can offer a balance between

development and conservation."

Bill says that one donated easement may inspire a neighbor landowner to seriously consider a similar action. "For example, a group of conservation-minded landowners in the Pedernales River watershed invited other

landowners in the watershed to attend meetings where the long-term values of protecting the quality of the water and the wildlife were discussed. Easement donors within the watershed were invited to encourage other landowners to follow their example."

Many communities in the Hill Country are setting up nature centers, as Bill's did in Fredericksburg. He says that establishing credibility begins initially by successfully completing small projects and publicizing them in the community. "Having my local community leaders go from skepticism to full support regarding a project, and then seeking my support on related projects is gratifying."

He is also gratified by seeing a dream become reality. "Seeing people of all ages appreciate and enjoy nature as they walk the trails is a lasting reward."



Betty Ann Ralston enjoyed the gardens in Scotland on a trip last year, but she finds great pleasure in her own backyard. "One day I was holding the hummingbird feeder when a little guy came to feed not four inches away from me."

Betty Ann Ralston

On the farm where she grew up, Betty Ann Ralston's mother would take her children on walks and point out trees and plants. "She loved botany," says Betty Ann. "I assumed I wasn't paying much attention, but when I grew up I discovered I knew the names of a lot of things because she had pointed them out to me."

She says her father was conservation-minded as well. "During the 1950s he incorporated conservation practices, such as contour farming, on some of his fields." Years later Betty Ann put to use what she learned from her parents while organic gardening with her husband.

Then, in 1991, an acquaintance asked her to attend a meeting of the Land Conservancy of Lake County (LCLC) in Illinois. Twenty-one years later she is the president.

"Lake County is in the upper northeast corner of the state, on the shores of Lake Michigan," says Betty Ann. "Several of our protected properties are lovely woods or wetlands. I fell in love with this area, and I want future generations to see it as I do now."

As with other all-volunteer land trusts, LCLC works primarily by accepting donations of land or conservation easements. And also like others, its board members have close ties to the community.

"I belong to the Junior Women's Club, I'm a planning commissioner for the village of Antioch, I recently joined the historical society, and I volunteer with the local food pantry," says Betty Ann.

The land trust has within its mission the goal of "increased student and citizen awareness and appreciation of the natural environment through public education and stewardship."

"We involve middle schools in one area," says Betty Ann. "The students help us raise prairie plants in their school greenhouse, then we hold a field day at least once a year so they can plant them on one of our properties."

Betty Ann says the school kids love getting out in the country for a day. "We have contests, like pulling mustard weed. They bring their lunches and sit in the woods and meadows. This is their opportunity to get out in the fresh air, feel the earth and get some exercise. With programs being cut, I don't think many children have the chance to enjoy the outdoors during school anymore."

The land trust also works with local community colleges. "One of our four board members is a teacher, and he involves some of his students in doing volunteer work. They get credit and we get help," she says.

Despite the outreach to their community, Betty Ann says she doesn't think the land trust is well known. "Perhaps we share this problem with other all-volunteer land trusts. We haven't marketed ourselves well. It's difficult to get anything in the local newspapers because they are shutting down. We're just now thinking about getting a presence on Facebook."

Betty Ann says they are also hurting for board members. "We give talks at other groups' events and we reach out in other ways, but everybody is busy. Volunteer groups in this area complain about shortages of board members."

Betty Ann touches on a concern of the entire land trust community: "We need somehow to reach beyond the usual pool of people."

She reflects on how she cares for her own backyard, a microcosm of sorts of the greater community. "We provide a refuge for the birds, animals and plants, a space they can call their own. I like my yard; it's not big at all, but I love working in the flower beds. We get our pleasures here. One day a hawk landed on the deck railing. He was 10 feet away from me. I froze like the squirrels, watching, mesmerized." 🌿

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The Land Trust Alliance has recently contracted with Conservation Impact, consultants specializing in nonprofit management, growth and sustainability, to identify challenges facing all-volunteer land trusts, methods for forming closer connections with the Alliance and its partners, and strategies for delivering services to meet their needs.