

## Howard County Conservancy celebrates 30 years of preserving land and providing environmental education



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From right, Howard County Conservancy Executive Director Meg Boyd; Holly Stone and Ann Jones, both former board members; and student scientist Arjun Banerjee, 15, are pictured in front of the Mt. Pleasant farm house on the grounds of the conservancy which is celebrating its 30th anniversary. In front is the historic property marker erected by Elisha Browne in 1800.

BY JANENE HOLZBERG

In 1990, three years before the Howard County Conservancy would establish its headquarters at Mt. Pleasant Farm in Woodstock, members of the newly founded land trust were working with a \$300 budget to place parcels of land into preservation all across the county.

The nonprofit's mission in the early years — before it had been offered ownership of the western Howard property that dates to the late 1600s — focused on acquiring donations of development rights to properties that landowners would agree not to develop in perpetuity.

As the conservancy marks its 30th anniversary in 2020 with an annual budget of \$770,000, its original mission to preserve land through conservation easements remains very much alive today.

Including its first conservation

easement in 1992, the trust placed 800 acres into preservation during its first decade. Today, more than 1,900 acres have been preserved.

That ongoing objective co-exists with a three-pronged mission to educate youths and adults about the natural

world, preserve the land for future generations and model responsible stewardship of the environment.

The mission to serve as a nature reserve and educational facility — for which the conservancy is perhaps better known — picked up momentum in the 2000s and was further cemented with the 2005 opening of the Gudelsky Environmental Education Center on the 232-acre property, leaders say.

A third mission to expand community outreach, which took center stage over the last decade, will continue to be a main focus for the nonprofit.

The conservancy, which has also been providing environmental education programs at Belmont Manor and Historic Park in ElkrIDGE since 2014, plans to mark its anniversary in a number of ways, said Meg Boyd, executive director since 2005.

A \$600,000 capital campaign to restore the historic carriage house at Mt. Pleasant for use as a programming space and to build a barn to store trail maintenance equipment is being formally launched as an anniversary initiative, Boyd said, adding the conservancy has already raised about 25% of that sum.

Other plans call for reaching out to 30 diverse communities in 2020 to discover “how we can offer programming that resonates with them,” she said.

A private program to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22 will highlight the Watershed Report Card Program. The nationally recognized program for ninth graders in all county public high schools

brings attention to the health of the Chesapeake Bay watershed and seeks to develop future stewards of the environment.

Looking further ahead, the conservancy plans to celebrate its 30th birthday with the public at a party during its Fall Festival on Oct. 4.

Much of what the conservancy has been able to accomplish is a direct result of “the foresight and generosity” of Ruth and Frances Brown, who stipulated in their wills their desire for their family farm to be preserved, Boyd said.

The Browns were Howard County teachers who died in the early 1990s without designating an agency to oversee their land. Discussions among state and county officials led to an agreement in 1993 that the conservancy would take ownership of Mt. Pleasant.

“I’ve often wished I could go back in time and call on the Brown sisters,” Boyd mused. “We could sit in their parlor and have a slice of their 7 Up cake or peach cobbler, and I could tell them all that’s happened at their farm.”

While the Browns got the preservation ball rolling with their gift, there were others who played roles in the conservancy’s early years.

“There’s no way to talk about the conservancy’s beginnings or about land preservation without talking about Sen. James Clark,” said Ann Jones, a land conservation expert and former conservancy board president whose family has owned and operated Bowling Green Farm in Sykesville since 1743.

“Jim Clark helped put together the deal to start the conservancy at a time when the inheritance tax was high and a lot had to be done” to make that happen, Jones said.

The late state senator and farmer worked alongside the late James H. Eacker, a retired Rouse Co. executive who was active in environmental issues, and they were “the real founders of the conservancy,” she said.

Their efforts “were on the cutting edge of land preservation, which was just

getting started across the state,” she said.

“Howard County would’ve developed very differently” without the formation of the conservancy as a land trust, Jones said. “That value will play out over generations.”

Holly Stone, an environmental educator and program committee member, traces her connection to the conservancy to an outdoor field trip she attended with one of her four children before a proposal to build an educational center on the property had taken root.

“I asked, ‘If it rains, that means no outdoor education for students for another year?’” recalled Stone, who has operated a summer camp in Maine for families and adults for 25 years.

Stone said that realization led to uncovering the nonprofit’s “dreams of never having to cancel field trips [because of bad weather and a lack of indoor space] and not having to use portable toilets,” she said.

Boyd credits Stone with “immediately seeing the need for an education center and helping us raise the seed money to make the vision a reality.”

“The hiking trails at Mt. Pleasant attract people who are already outdoors,” Stone said of the four miles of pathways. “So, if you are only preaching to the choir, what difference are you really making?”

“When you’ve got a building, kids enjoy themselves more and want their parents to come out and it snowballs from there,” Stone said.

In the 15 years since the Guldesky Center opened, nearly 305,000 youths and adults have participated in programming at Mt. Pleasant, Boyd said.

Jahantab Siddiqui, chief administrative officer for the Howard County Public School System and a conservancy board member, said he’s excited about the continued expansion of their educational partnership, which was launched in 1997 and formally signed in 2003.

Five field trips for 300 students took place that first year, he said. In 2019, 162 field trips for nearly 19,000 students were held, split between visits to the conservancy by students and visits by conservancy staff and volunteers to schools.

As a follow-up to a food scraps program piloted by the conservancy at Pointer’s Run Elementary, Clarksville Middle and River Hill High schools, a new recycling pilot program is currently underway at the same three schools, Siddiqui said.

“The conservancy nurtures all students by providing hands-on opportunities,” Siddiqui said.

Arjun Banerjee, a Reservoir High School student who took part in the Watershed Report Card Program for two years, also served on the student task force that met with County Executive Calvin Ball a few times.

“Arjun really represents the future well,” Boyd said.

In response to an energized youth movement aiming to convince government leaders worldwide to take action to combat climate change, the conservancy will pilot a new climate change field trip in May at eight county high schools, Boyd said.

Full rollout of the field trip across the county is set for spring 2021.

“Our research shows it will be the first of its kind in the Chesapeake Bay region,” she said.

Students will investigate how climate change affects their communities and how residents can prepare for it. Stations to visit will include: impact on species, carbon footprint in our food, vehicle emissions and carbon sequestration in our forests, among others.

“Students will receive messages of hope and ideas to share with their families and local communities,” Boyd said. “Our youth are already influencers on this critically important issue. Part of the conservancy’s future is lifting our students up.”