

Environmental activism begins at home

Stewards of Kleinstuck volunteer to preserve Kalamazoo natural area

LET INVOLVED

MEETINGS

Sunday: 3 to 5 p.m., Kazoo School, 1401 Cherry St., Kalamazoo.

Feb. 20: 7 p.m., Disciples of Christ Church, 2208 Winchell Ave., Kalamazoo.

IN THE WEB

www.stewards-ofkleinstuck.org



BY STEVEN DAVISON
Special to CityLife

KALAMAZOO — What began as a moment of inspiration during a kayaking trip has evolved into a serious grass-roots effort to restore the health of one of Kalamazoo's oldest and beloved natural areas.

It was during this quiet retreat in September to the Les Cheneaux Islands in Lake Huron that Liene Dindonis, of Kalamazoo, suggested to her kayaking companions, Jacqueline Taylor, Sarah Reding and Pam

Poley, also of Kalamazoo, that they take the uplifting experience of the camping trip and utilize it as a force for positive change in the world.

The women didn't have to look far to know where they could make an immediate impact.

"Looking close at hand — to her (Dindonis') own backyard, and nearly that for many others of us — the Kleinstuck Preserve stands as a potential haven for healthy wildlife and human renewal," Taylor said.



COURTESY OF STEWARDS OF KLEINSTUCK

Volunteers Heather Ratliff and Erin Fuller attack Oriental bittersweet during a recent workday at Kleinstuck Preserve.

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"But it is genuinely threatened by invasive plants and human housing, to name two forces that have damaged it. As we know, when the health of a creature or ecosystem is compromised, it tends to have less resistance to further health threats and (continues) to decline."

Backyard to many

Kleinstuck Preserve, a natural wetland area owned by Western Michigan University, is the "backyard" to many Kalamazoo residents living in the Oakland Drive, Maple Street and Bronson Boulevard neighborhoods. The preserve is used by WMU faculty and students for research and academic purposes and by many locals for hiking, bird-watching and peaceful sojourns into the tranquil environment of the preserve.

The women called Paul MacNellis, from Landscape Services at Western Michigan University, to find out how to help. MacNellis directed them to Nate Fuller, conservation and stewardship director for the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy.

Fuller had met over the years with MacNellis to discuss management of natural areas. Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy also had been approached by the Stewardship Network about expanding into western and southwestern Michigan. The Stewardship Network is a grass-roots cooperative organization working to protect, restore and manage Michigan's natural

resources, organizations and businesses manage specific sites through the sharing of ideas, resources and information.

That Earth Day, Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy acted as a partner with WMU and the Kalamazoo Nature Center to weed out garlic mustard from Kleinstuck, Fuller said.

Stewards are born

Fuller knew it was going to take a far more serious and concerted effort to have a long-term effect on the health of the preserve. When he was contacted by Dindonis about organizing volunteers to help restore Kleinstuck's health and vitality, Fuller jumped at the chance.

The Stewards of Kleinstuck, a volunteer organization dedicated to restoring the health of the preserve, was born.

According to Fuller, a healthy preserve is one that is "diverse and stingy." It was from Fuller's experience in natural-areas management that the group began to lay the groundwork for the group.

"Diversity is important because that is what allows a natural area to accommodate seasonal, annual and long-term changes to surrounding conditions," Fuller said. "With a wide variety of plants, there will always be some ready to thrive as things get warmer and drier or cooler and wetter.

"Stingy refers to a natural area's ability to store water and

should hold onto the water and nutrients — erosion, nutrient loading, dried-out wetland soils are all signs of an unhealthy system that we are seeing in Kleinstuck," he said.

Fighting invaders

One of the major concerns of the stewards is the presence of invasive species, which choke the life out of some native species of plantlife that once thrived in Kleinstuck.

"Removing invasive species is only one part of our efforts to restore Kleinstuck's health. It is important to us to not just remove invasive plants, but we want to bring back native plant species that have been lost to Kleinstuck to help improve its diversity," Fuller said.

To accomplish this, the Stewards of Kleinstuck have had several volunteer workdays to remove the invasive species from the preserve. About 20 to 30 volunteers, including families and children, have joined in the effort.

Although removing weeds and invasive species during a frigid or rainy afternoon may not sound like much fun, the communal effort and shared enthusiasm for the preserve is what drives the Stewards of Kleinstuck toward their goal.

"People are so weary of hearing about and witnessing the damage to our world; worse than that, we're weighted down by our own helplessness in most matters we hear about through the media," Taylor

own neighborhoods, our own backyards, we can take simple actions that have significant impact, especially when we band together to protect our own communities. This is sincerely exciting. And it's happening."

Conservation inspiration

Dindonis echoes those sentiments.

"My greatest hope is that it will not get eaten up by commercial and residential interests, but remain as natural place of joy/retreat to all city people so that it will inspire us all to think and work more toward conservation of the natural habitat," she said.

MacNellis is excited about the stewards' goal.

"What we have been lacking till now is an evaluation, management plan and a task force to accomplish some needed Tender Loving Care. (Kleinstuck) is a 48-acre gem in the rough that stands in the middle of Kalamazoo and serves as a fine respite for people and wildlife alike," he said.

The group plans to meet every second and fourth Sunday of the month. All volunteers are welcome. The next workday will be at 3 p.m. Sunday, meeting at the Kazoo School, 1401 Cherry St. There also will be a public meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 20 at Disciples of Christ Church, 2208 Winchell Ave. The Stewards of Kleinstuck will discuss the details of Nate Fuller's Kleinstuck Management Plan and plans for the