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Avalonia Land Conservancy acquires North Stonington parcel known as 'granddad's forest'

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Melina Khan, Special to The Day

North Stonington — When Paulann Sheets turns on her computer in her Shelter Island, N.Y., home, she is greeted by an image of her late husband, Herman, sitting in the grass of the land his family knew as "granddad's." "That's my keepsake," she said of her screensaver.

In 1982, Herman Sheets of Groton purchased an 86-acre parcel on Puttke Road. The established engineer and professor at the University of Rhode Island acquired it as an investment the same year he would marry Paul. Until his death in 2006, the land served as a routine stopover when any of his six children or seven grandchildren visited Sheets. Thus, it became known as "granddad's forest."

"We didn't do a whole lot except walk around and enjoy it," Paulann Sheets recalled of the visits.

It wasn't until years after Herman's death that she began thinking about what to do with the land. With the help of real estate agent Ann Bergendahl, Paulann Sheets listed the property for sale in 2016 with the intention to be sold for conservation.

Shortly thereafter, Avalonia Land Conservancy took an interest in the parcel. Several years would go by until fundraising efforts were fulfilled and, on June 11, Avalonia acquired the tract now known as the Herman E. S. Forest.

The land was sold for \$325,000, with funding coming from a variety of sources. The state's Open Space and Land Acquisition Watershed program, which provides funding for land conservation efforts across Connecticut, provided \$195,000. Grantmaking nonprofits, the Bafflin Foundation and Summer Hill Foundation, backed the project with \$50,000 and \$20,000, respectively. Ducks Unlimited, a wetlands conservation organization, contributed \$50,000.

The final fundraising efforts came from the town of North Stonington. A failed town meeting vote in October 2019 that was set to provide \$40,000 of funding led to the launch of a community fundraiser with Sustainable CT. That fundraiser raised \$32,800, with \$25,300 coming from donors and \$7,500 matched by Sustainable CT.

With fundraising yielding more than \$347,000, Avalonia hopes to direct the overage to other acquisitions, the agency's Director of Development and Programming Terri Eickel said.

Now that it owns the land, Avalonia will begin crafting a management plan to evaluate the property, identify invasive plant species and mark up trails. Eventually, the forest will be open for public access for hiking and in the Green Falls River that runs through it. The group is aiming to provide universal access to the river, meaning it will be accessible for people of all abilities.

Development efforts are in the beginning stages, but Eickel said she hopes the land will be open by the fall. Avalonia also is planning to highlight historical aspects of the land when defining its trails, including features of Colonial and Indigenous significance, as well as environmental aspects.

"The things we're looking at incorporating into this trail are (of) high educational value," Eickel said.

Situated in Laurel Glen, one of the original villages of North Stonington, the forest is included in the Wood Pawcatuck Watershed, which protects the drinking water of thousands of southeastern Connecticut residents.

Though she now lives out of state and no longer is tied to "granddad's forest," Paulann Sheets said she hopes the land's legacy continues into the next generation of families who visit it.

She opted to divide the money from the sale into 14 equal parts to be distributed to Herman's children, grandchildren and one great-grandchild. She also has committed to donating signage and trails for the property over the next five years.

Eickel echoed the impact land conservation has on creating family memories.

"Whenever you talk to people about their love of land conservation, it always comes down to childhood memories with their parents," Eickel said. "That's one thing that I would love for people to take away from the idea of taking their kids outside ... is that you're creating memories that these kids will talk about when they are 80 years old."

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