

Volunteers clear growth from Miller dunes



Mark Montgomery of Chesterton and Marsha Bradley of Gary wield brush cutters as they join other volunteers, including Carole Barnes of Gary (far right), during a Shirley Heinze Land Trust volunteer work day to allow more sunlight on Miller Dune in the Miller section of Gary, Ind. Saturday November 3, 2012. | Stephanie Dowell~Sun-Times Media

By Michelle L. Quinn

GARY — The log 6-year-old Catherine Quinlan dragged down the ridge of the Miller Dune probably wasn't very heavy, but it was taller than she and therefore quite the task, to hear her tell it.

Catherine joined her parents, Shirley Heinze Trust stewardship program manager Paul Quinlan and wife Karen, and six other people for a day of chopping and restoring the dune at the apex of Forest Avenue and Rush Street in the city's Miller section Saturday afternoon. The "Mickey Mouse"-shaped dune, along with the Bayless Dune a bit to the east, received some TLC they haven't seen in years.

"Nine volunteers was a good turnout for us," Quinlan said as he descended the fairly steep and brush-buried dune. "We cleared out at least an acre."

The Miller and Bayless dunes, through building houses and other natural shifting, are separating more and more from the National Lakeshore each year, he said. Thus, it becomes difficult for bees to pollinate and other species to do the things they do to keep the land in pristine condition.

Pair that with years and years of brush multiplying on the land, and many native plant species and grasses start to wither out as well.

Fortunately, the group's cleanup revealed the Miller Dune still has rare life to it in the forms of the Pennsylvania sedge, fragrant sumac and little blue stem plants, Quinlan said.

"There's still some there where the wind off the lake blows the leaves away," he said. "But for at least 150 years (since Native Americans lived in the dunes), there hasn't been much in the way of controlled burning on the woody growth, so we're trying to open it back up."



Carole Barnes of Gary (left) coats the cut stump of a tree to prevent grow back as Marsha Bradley, also of Gary, uses a brush cutter during a Shirley Heinze Land Trust volunteer work day to thin the tree canopy to allow more sunlight on Miller Dune in the Miller section of Gary, Ind. Saturday November 3, 2012. | Stephanie Dowell~Sun-Times Media

John Kirulis, of Gary's Miller section, has a Heinze Trust parcel near his house but never knew the Miller and Bayless dunes existed until Saturday. He manned his brush cutter with the best of them.

"I appreciate the conservancies and the work they do," Kirulis said. "I've been working with wood today, cutting away the small saplings and brush. There's lots of sassafras here."

Mark Montgomery, of Chesterton, has put in 1,000 volunteer hours with the National Lakeshore and likewise has the same appreciation Kirulis has of Heinze's efforts.

"I'm retired, and it's fun to return the wilderness to its natural condition," he said.

Cut saplings were lightly coated with a vegetable-oil based herbicide to prevent new growth, said Karen Quinlan. They'll eventually rot and fertilize the new the growth.