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In tune with nature

By Idelle Kerzner Post-Tribune correspondent



Volunteer Kevin Kuhn (center) describes safe practices for burning brush piles during a 2012 Calumet Volunteer Leadership Training Workshop.

Pam Thompson of Michigan City is 71 years old and claims to be retired.

But with her botany hikes, beach restoration projects, volunteer plant surveys, master gardening programs and hands-on involvement in environmental studies, one wonders if she is really in a state of retirement.

“I have had a passion for the natural world since I was a child,” Thompson said. “I always loved being outdoors enjoying the plants and the animals.”

Thanks to the Shirley Heinze Land Trust, people like Thompson have found an outlet for their love of nature and yearning to make the world a better place.

According to trust Stewardship Director Paul Quinlan, the organization’s mission can be summed up in three words: preserve, restore and educate.

“We protect habitats and the ecosystem of Northwest Indiana through acquiring, restoring, and protecting environmentally significant landscapes for present and future generations,” Quinlan explained. “We inspire and educate people of all ages about the value of land conservation and how to protect our natural world.”

Quinlan is aware that educated volunteers are the backbone of the local, non-profit organization funded by donations and grants. So Quinlan and staff from the trust as well as The Field Museum, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Chicago Park District, Forest Preserves of Cook County and Openlands are providing hands-on training with the volunteering experience.

“Our Volunteer Leader Training Series ... will expose volunteers to the ecology of the Calumet region and improve their knowledge and skills to enable them to lead other volunteers in restoring and sustaining our local ecosystems,” Quinlan said.

Participants walk away not only with invaluable information about how to live in harmony with the natural environment, but will develop the skills necessary to become leaders in monitoring and managing natural resources at local waterways and nature preserves..

“In our modern world, where humans have mastered a good deal of technology to conquer the elements and make ourselves comfortable, it can be easy to forget that we are still a part of the ecosystem, and depend on nature for our basic needs,” Quinlan said.

Get involved

The Volunteer Leader Training Series will consist of four workshops held on Saturdays between Feb. 22 and April 19. Participants will be required to attend volunteer events at local nature preserves in the intervening weeks to apply their knowledge and gain mentorship from other local land stewards.

Registration is required by Feb. 7. A \$40 registration fee covers course materials. Scholarships are available. For more information, contact Paul Quinlan at pquinlan@heinzetrust.org or 242-8558.

To learn more about the Calumet Stewardship Initiative and how to become involved, visit the website at www.calumetstewardship.org.