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At the Forefront

Restoring Natural Habitats Top Priority for Shirley Heinze Land Trust

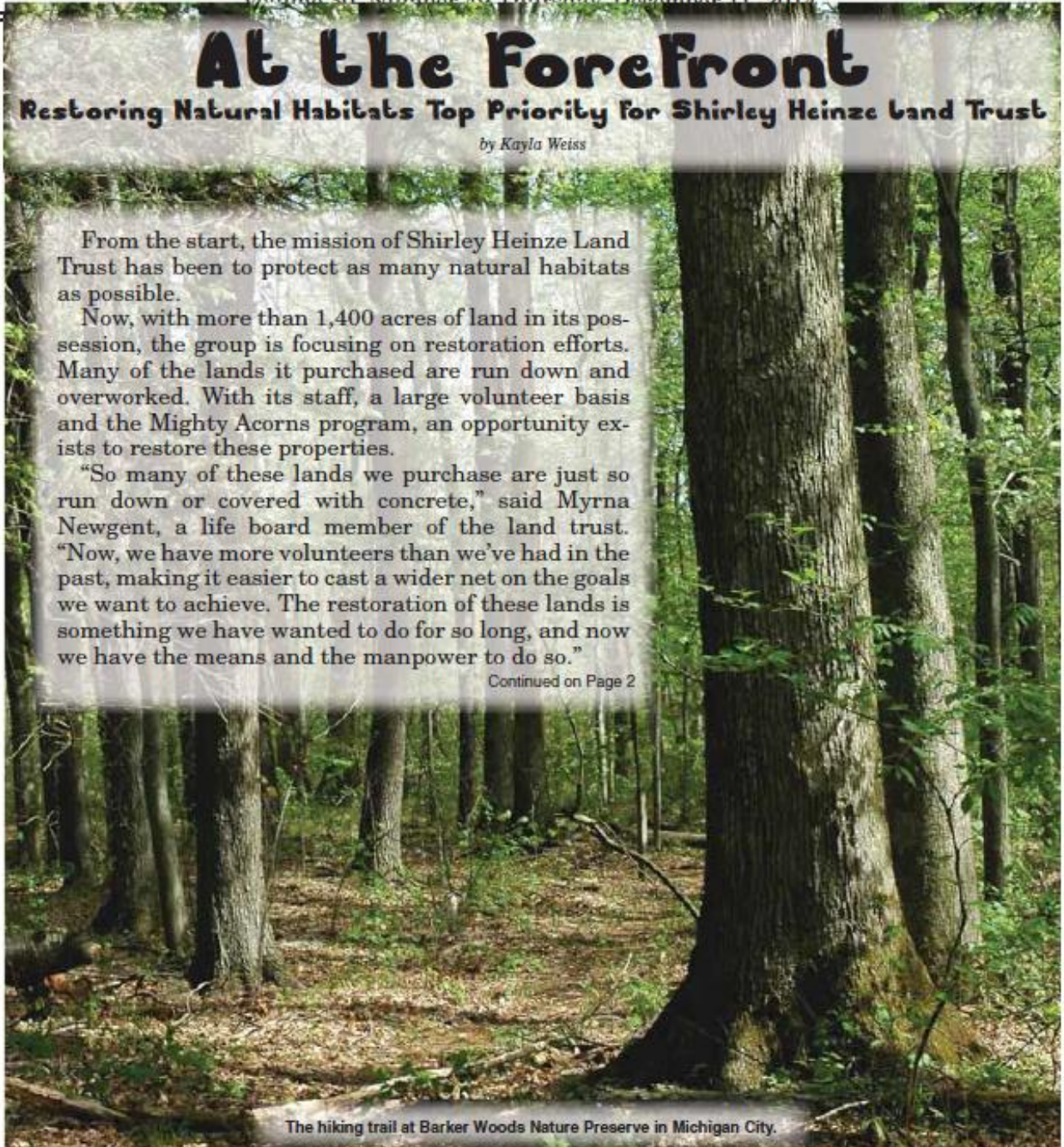
by Kayla Weiss

From the start, the mission of Shirley Heinze Land Trust has been to protect as many natural habitats as possible.

Now, with more than 1,400 acres of land in its possession, the group is focusing on restoration efforts. Many of the lands it purchased are run down and overworked. With its staff, a large volunteer basis and the Mighty Acorns program, an opportunity exists to restore these properties.

“So many of these lands we purchase are just so run down or covered with concrete,” said Myrna Newgent, a life board member of the land trust. “Now, we have more volunteers than we’ve had in the past, making it easier to cast a wider net on the goals we want to achieve. The restoration of these lands is something we have wanted to do for so long, and now we have the means and the manpower to do so.”

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The hiking trail at Barker Woods Nature Preserve in Michigan City.

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Forefront

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Shirley Heinze Land Trust, now located in Valparaiso, has been protecting natural lands and habitats in the southern part of the Lake Michigan Watershed since 1981, when it was founded by Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Seidner and named in honor of Dr. Shirley Heinze of Ogden Dunes, whose efforts to help the Seidner's children and preserve the Indiana Dunes were greatly admired and appreciated.

The initial board of trustees, which consisted of three people, met for the first time in 1982 and soon began acquiring dune lots in the Miller Beach neighborhood of Gary and wetland lots in the Great Marsh in Beverly Shores. A few years later, in 1986, the board expanded, which brought on Barbara Plimpton, who spent 18 years on the board. With a botanical background, she headed the hike program

and offered public lectures, promoting scientific investigation. Two years later, Newgent joined the board, becoming a life member.

"I really didn't know what I was doing, but we made it through," Newgent said with a laugh. "I couldn't have done any of it without the team here. There is just a tremendous group of people that work and volunteer here, and none of this would be possible without all of their help."

During this time, the board continued to focus on acquiring wetlands in the Great Marsh, dunes in Miller and dune and swale in Gary, resulting in the first transfer of land to Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in 1993. In the ensuing six years, the Trust acquired Cressmoor Prairie, which became the first Shirley Heinze property to be dedicated as a state nature preserve, resulting in its number of land holdings nearly doubling after acquiring more than 300 acres.



The new Meadowbrook facility in Valparaiso.



A map of the additional land the Trust purchased to add to the Meadowbrook facility.

Today, the Trust manages more than 1,400 acres of protected land in various counties near Lake Michigan, including a wide range of high dune, tall-grass prairie, oak savanna, boreal flatwoods, dune-and-swale, woodlands, marshes, swamps, ponds and riparian habitats. This count includes nearly 1,200 acres the Trust owns outright, 100 acres held as conservation easements and nearly 30 acres that have been transferred to the National Park Service and Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Currently, five Trust-owned properties — Cressmoor Prairie, Seidner Dune & Swale, John Merle Coulter Preserve, Barker Woods and Ambler Flatwoods (the last two are in Michigan City) — are dedicated to the public as state nature preserves. Several of the Trust's preserves feature trail systems that guide and educate visitors while they hike. The Trust also has made contributions to natural areas owned by other groups, including the Indiana DNR, The Nature Conservancy, La Porte County Parks, Lake County Parks and Portage Parks Department.

The overall mission is two-fold:

- 1) Protect habitats and ecosystems of Northwest Indiana by purchasing, restoring and protecting environmentally significant properties for future generations
- 2) Inspire and educate all ages about land conservation and how important it is to protect the natural world.

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Indiana University-Northwest students participate in a sampling group.

"Simply put, the Trust aims to preserve, restore and educate," Newgent said. "We want to be able to have the chance to preserve and, in many cases, restore these properties to their original state so that they are here for future generations to enjoy and learn from. There are so many things that nature has to offer, so many things for us to still learn. We are still finding new species of plants, learning new things about the plants we thought we knew everything about... There is always more to learn."

After the Trust has acquired a remnant natural area, it begins the long process of returning it to its original, healthy state. Each piece of property under restoration has a management plan specifically tailored to fit the condition the land is in, and return it to their ideal conditions.

The team at the Trust aims to sustain numerous biological resources, as well as to neutralize the aspects of modern landscapes that may compromise the health of natural habitats. Through restoration efforts, they also tackle issues such as habitat fragmentation (habitat loss chipping away at larger, continuous habitats), fire suppression and invasive species.

However, restoration is an ongoing process, slowly transitioning into simple maintenance. This can happen at dif-

ferent rates depending on the constraints at each individual site. The Trust works to improve the overall function and sustainability of each natural area, making it less dependent on human intervention.

In recent years, Shirley Heinze Land Trust has renewed an emphasis on stewardship as its land holdings continue to increase, resulting in the hiring of the first full-time stewardship manager and major restoration work at its Ivanhoe South property in Gary. New funding resources and partnerships yielded a large savanna restoration project at Bur Oak Woods in Hobart, expanding volunteer programs and initiating The Mighty Acorns Environmental Education Program. Started in 2009,

it is the result of a partnership between the Trust, The Field Museum and Dunes Learning Center. It is designed to allow students to have numerous opportunities to engage and learn from local natural environments and be a part of their restoration.

"The Mighty Acorns Program is a really special program," Newgent said. "We actually had to hire an educational coordinator to be in charge of the program because it's doing so well. It's so nice to see these schoolchildren get so excited about learning and ex-



Don Babcock helps dedicate the Little Calumet Bridge. The Little Calumet River flows through Westchester Township and Chesterton.

perimenting in these different habitats. These children are the future of the Trust, and it's so wonderful to see how many of them are so interested in preserving the natural habitats in their communities."

"It just exploded," Newgent continued. "You get your foot in the door with one community, and another community hears about it and wants to get in on it. We have been very fortunate to have such helpful teachers in each district that make sure everything is being done so that the students reach their full potential in the program."

Currently, Mighty Acorns has reached 139 classrooms, serving more than 3,700 students in Michigan City Area Schools, the School City of Hobart, Portage Township Schools, School City of Hammond, Gary Community School, School City of East Chicago, Charter School of the Dunes and the Discovery Charter School.

The Trust has published four books of environmental interest and continues to conduct various educational hikes, workshops, lectures and other public presentations. All of this is made possible by not just the Trust's staff, but the many volunteers.

"We're always looking for more help, because the work is never done," Newgent said with a laugh. "There are still so many lands that need to be restored, and so many plants and wildlife that still need to be catalogued. Having our volunteers is a blessing."



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