

Lake County Preservation Foundation president champions the cause of the forests



Nels Leutwiler, at Lakewood Forest Preserve, serves as president of the Preservation Foundation, the charitable partner of the Lake County Forest Preserves.
(*Courtesy of the Leutwiler family*)



Kim Mikus

Posted
1/8/2021 6:00 AM

Growing up on the west side of Lake Forest, Nels Leutwiler has vivid memories of frequent childhood visits to Captain Daniel Wright Woods

Forest Preserve in Mettawa. Later, the University of Alaska graduate fondly recalls his work building the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System.

After graduating with a journalism degree, Leutwiler took a job operating heavy equipment to help build the pipeline. He saved money to further his education and put himself through law school at the University of Denver. While in law school, he also earned a master's degree as part of a joint degree program.

"After witnessing firsthand the damage the pipeline boom had done to my sleepy little college town of Fairbanks, I decided to also get a master's in planning and community development from the University of Colorado," he said.



Nels Leutwiler worked on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System after graduating from college. He was 25 when this picture was taken just

north of the Brooks Range, at the start of the Arctic plains. - Courtesy of Nels Leutwiler

These influences, and many others, have driven Leutwiler into a leadership role supporting the Preservation Foundation, the charitable partner of the Lake County Forest Preserves.

"My work building the pipeline is what got me involved in environmental protection," Leutwiler said. "I have been a supporter of the environment and open lands all my life."

For the past 10 years, Leutwiler has been a volunteer member of the Preservation Foundation's board of directors, and is currently serving his second year as president of the independent, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The 12-member board comprises civic, community and business leaders from across Lake County.



Nels Leutwiler grew up near Captain Daniel Wright Woods Forest Preserve and has early memories exploring the Mettawa preserve. -

Courtesy of Jeff Goldberg

"The Foundation drives the mission of the Lake County Forest Preserves and helps support projects and programs that might otherwise go unfunded or take many years to complete," he said.

Leutwiler is an avid outdoorsman and enjoys paddling, hiking and biking in the preserves, especially along the Des Plaines River Trail and Greenway.

"I also like to snowshoe and cross-country ski."

While it's difficult to choose a favorite preserve, Leutwiler says he enjoys hiking at Old School Forest Preserve in Mettawa with his wife, Liz, a volunteer for the Lake County Forest Preserves. The couple relishes exploring new preserves through the annual Hike Lake County program.

"We really liked McDonald Woods this fall," Leutwiler said, adding that they usually go to the preserves twice a week. Married for 39 years, they live in Lake Bluff where they raised their three children. They are helping their two young grandchildren develop a love of the outdoors.

Earlier in his career, Leutwiler practiced and taught law and then owned a local manufacturing company. He now owns and operates Ridgeline Holdings LLC, a company that invests in and manages real estate on the North Shore.

Through his role as president of the Preservation Foundation, Leutwiler spends a great deal of time advocating for the Lake County Forest Preserves.

"Through private philanthropy, the Foundation is able to accelerate the agency's strategic goals and priorities," he said. "Donations to the Foundation help to preserve and restore natural and cultural resources in perpetuity, and extend community outreach and education about the importance of sustaining these landscapes."

He believes this is more important than ever as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout have had a significant impact on the agency's nontax revenues, which are expected to be down \$1.7 million for 2020. This comes at a time when the preserves and trails are experiencing record-high usage levels while visitors turn to nature as an escape.

"Of property taxes in Lake County, only about 2 percent of the average tax bill goes to support our Lake County Forest Preserves, which is one of the nation's top conservation agencies," he said.

There are several ways people can support the Preservation Foundation.

"One of our most urgent needs this time of year is to meet our goal for the Annual Fund," Leutwiler said. "Gifts of all sizes are meaningful and help support a variety of important programs."

Recent Annual Fund grants are supporting a partnership between the Dunn Museum and the College of Lake County on a new virtual exhibition that profiles Black voices; the reintroduction of critically rare plants in various forest preserves; and a study on the health of Lake County's Blanding's turtle populations.



In an effort to establish a new population of Blanding's turtles, a new program called the Founders Circle has started. - Courtesy of the Lake County Forest Preserves

"Gifts to our popular Adopt-a-Turtle program give a baby Blanding's turtle a head start so it can thrive in the wild," Leutwiler said. "With a gift of \$120, Turtle Champions can name a baby turtle, reared as part of a head-starting program and released in preserves with established populations."

"In an effort to establish a new population of Blanding's turtles, we recently started a program called the Founders Circle," Leutwiler said. A \$1,000 donation supports one "Founding" turtle. "Funds raised will be used to monitor the health of this new population, and the results of this work will guide wildlife management decisions in the coming years," he said.

Leutwiler said he is proud of the Foundation's partnership with the Lake County Forest Preserves and the Chicago Botanic Garden to operate a 1.25-acre sustainable farm at Greenbelt Forest Preserve in North Chicago. In addition to work experience, high school students employed at the Green Youth Farm in Lake County gain entrepreneurial and job skills training, guidance by adult mentors, and exposure to healthy foods and cooking.

Volunteering is another option. Each year, thousands of people give the gift of their time and talent to help the Lake County Forest Preserves. They lead fishing camps, plant native gardens, monitor wildlife, improve the health of preserves and waterways within them, and assist at the Dunn Museum in Libertyville. Volunteers have given more than 300,000 hours over the last decade.



Nels Leutwiler and his wife, Liz, explored McDonald Woods Forest Preserve this fall as part of the Hike Lake County program. - Courtesy of Michael Brankin

Looking ahead, Leutwiler said the Foundation is working to secure \$20 million in endowment funds by the end of 2025 to provide a permanent funding source for planting native trees, managing invasive species, and conducting controlled burns; all critical land management activities.

"The endowment will also provide a steady source of matching funds necessary to secure outside grants and donations in order to further advance projects," he said.

"I can't think of a better leader for the Foundation, especially as we move into a new endowment campaign that is so important to the future of the Lake County Forest Preserves," said Rebekah Snyder, executive director of the Preservation Foundation. "In addition to giving generously, Nels gives in many other ways: his time, his network, his experience and expertise, and his passion for our mission."

To explain the importance of the foundation, Leutwiler recently joined Snyder, Foundation Board Member Karen Hunter and Lake County Forest Preserves Executive Director Ty Kovach in a Words of the Woods (<http://anchor.fm/words-of-the-woods>) podcast episode, "A Strong Foundation."

When asked what the best fundraising tool is for the Foundation, Leutwiler says the answer is simple.

"It's the forest preserves themselves. There is an emotional attachment to the land. I urge people to experience these pockets of nature throughout the county."

When you support the Preservation Foundation, you nourish the Lake County Forest Preserves. To learn more about giving opportunities, visit LCFPD.org/donate (<http://LCFPD.org/donate>) or call (847) 968-3110.

- Kim Mikus is a communications specialist for the Lake County Forest Preserves. She writes a bimonthly column about various aspects of the preserves. Contact her with ideas or questions at kmikuscroke@LCFPD.org. Connect with the Lake County Forest Preserves on social media @LCFPD.

Copyright © 2021 Paddock Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 280, Arlington Heights, IL 60006