

Landscapes



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Heaven Overhead and Underfoot: Bow in the Clouds Continues a Nun's Green Legacy

It's called Bow in the Clouds Preserve. Yet what's most remarkable about SWMLC's new 60-acre preserve is not what's found above, but what lies underfoot. Although located within the Kalamazoo city limits, it has many wild corners where few humans will ever tread.

That's because Bow in the Clouds boasts an extensive boardwalk system — approximately 1,000 feet — which traverses a pristine stream and wetland. It allows visitors to pass with ease over terrain that would otherwise require a strenuous slog through boot-sucking muck and marsh grass.

But the preserve doesn't surrender easily to the boardwalk's benign intrusion. The land here is so fertile, so greedy for growth, that each summer a jungle of vegetation bursts forth to overtake the wooden walkway. Only diligent pruning by Boy Scouts and other volunteers keeps the green wall of jewelweed and Joe-Pye weed at bay.

Sister Virginia "Ginny" Jones, who's been the preserve's lead caretaker for



An Eagle Scout constructed this bridge that allows passage over one of the creeks at Bow in the Clouds Preserve. Photo by Peter Ter Louw.

most of 39 years, views the boardwalk as a rare concession to the forces of development. She'd much rather see Bow in the Clouds become an increasingly wild and even sacred place.

"Managing a preserve doesn't mean that you go around and whack everything with a machete," Sr. Ginny said. "That's not the kind of consciousness, or energy, that governs this place. We want to be part of nature, not masters of it."

Although she's a Catholic nun, Sr. Ginny can sometimes sound like a Buddhist — and even a Druid — when

she talks about the natural world. But more to the point is how Bow in the Clouds Preserve has allowed Sr. Ginny and her supporters to put their faith and environmental ideals into practice.

The name Bow in the Clouds comes from the Bible (Genesis 9:13) where God set a "bow in the clouds" as a sign of the new covenant between Him and the earth. The preserve property was once part of the Nazareth campus, a Catholic liberal arts school that closed in the early 1990s.

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Coon Hollow Preserve

In collaboration with SWMLC, the Fabius Township Citizens' Coalition (FTCC), has created a new preserve in St. Joseph County that protects a wetland natural area along scenic Coon Hollow Road.

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“When the Sisters of St. Joseph [Sr. Ginny’s order] first acquired this land in the early 1900s, it was farm country,” Sr. Ginny said. “When I got here in 1968, there wasn’t much on Gull Road except a Harding’s store.”

Even now, when you tour the preserve with Sr. Ginny, one can imagine how it used to be. There were few trees a century ago, and you can see where the pasture would have sloped downhill to the marsh.

“This place got us through the Depression,” Sr. Ginny said. “The sisters didn’t have much money, but the farm provided food and work for several local families. Some even stayed in housing owned by the community.”

Many of those who served here have become literally one with the landscape.



Visitors to Bow in the Clouds Preserve can use boardwalks to enjoy the scenic area. Photo by Peter Ter Louw.

In an unadorned cemetery near the preserve’s trailhead, neat ranks of simple headstones mark the graves of nuns who lived and died as members of this faith community.

As Nazareth College modernized after World War II, the agricultural operations faded away. The acreage that was the farm lay fallow, as the hillsides reverted to woods and the pastures to native wetland.

On this tableau, Sr. Ginny would help write a new chapter in the land’s history. She arrived here in 1968, a 24-year-old with a master’s degree in botany, fresh from her doctoral studies at Michigan State University. At Nazareth, Sr. Ginny taught environmental science.

It was a heady time to be a young nun and a budding environmentalist.

The church’s Second Vatican Council had ushered in a host of reforms for Catholic clergy and lay people alike. The Sisters of St. Joseph had broadened their ministry to include a host of new social concerns, such as the environment.

“We began to make a clearer connection between faith and caring for creation,” Sr. Ginny said. She even helped host Kalamazoo’s first Earth Day celebration, which was held at Nazareth in 1970.

As a teacher, Sr. Ginny used the preserve for

re-creation and as a hands-on science classroom. With plenty of eager, affordable workers available (i.e., college students) to build trails and plant trees, Bow in the Clouds was dedicated in 1973.

In the 1980s, Sr. Ginny took a demanding job in executive management at nearby Borgess Medical Center. It had its rewards, but after a brush with burnout, she returned to Nazareth and her role as an environmental teacher and eco-activist.

This time around, her sense of spirituality was broader and deeper. She’d passed through trials, such as the death of her father, which made her rely more heavily on the solace and healing power of nature. Through the Transformations Spirituality Center at Nazareth, Sr. Ginny now leads courses and activities that draw on a range of faith traditions, such as solstice ceremonies.

Yet as an aging religious order, the newly renamed Congregation of St. Joseph lacks the people power to maintain a 60-acre nature preserve. So after negotiations that spanned several years, Bow in the Clouds was transferred to SWMLC in July 2007.

As a long-time SWMLC member, Sr. Ginny says she’s confident that her beloved preserve is in good hands.

“We want the public to use it for what we call ‘re-creation,’” said Sr. Ginny, now a spry 64. “We know many people today are separated from religious tradition, and we respect that. We also know that before formal religion existed, people encountered something of the holy in the natural world. And that something — that peace, solitude and wisdom — is what we believe people can still find here.”

— Tom Springer

Tom Springer is a former board member. He is currently senior editor with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and a freelance writer. Tom resides in Three Rivers with his wife Nancy and their two daughters.