

Legacy of environmentalist Maggy Bowman in Indian River County still has wings

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It's Lagoon Days at the Environmental Learning Center and fourth-graders from Vero Beach Elementary School excitedly pour out of the yellow bus.

A day outside, away from the classroom, experiencing the Lagoon – that's a good day.

It's what Maggy Bowman wanted when she and a handful of local Audubon members began planning the Environmental Learning Center in the 1980s.

Naturalist, birder and advocate for the environment, elected county commissioner, friend and teacher, Maggy Bowman was an unstoppable force.

Although she passed away in her sleep on Feb. 8, 2006, her legacy has wings.

Generations of Indian River County children catch a glimpse of her whenever they visit the Environmental Learning Center, go fishing for red drum in the Lagoon or spot a shy Florida scrub jay.

Bowman was one of the original founders of the Pelican Island Audubon Society in the early 1960s, as well as its president, recording secretary and "Peligram" editor.

She helped found the Marine Resource Council, which was licensed in 1991 and the ELC in 1988. Located on Wabasso Island between Vero Beach and Sebastian, the 64-acre sanctuary is surrounded by the Indian River Lagoon.

Today, the Maggy Bowman Camp Scholarship Fund makes it possible for a number of campers to participate in the Center's many Summer Ecology Adventures.

Driving force

But calling these outdoor ecology experiences "camps" is almost a disservice. The emphasis at the ELC is on having fun and coming eye-to-eye and toe-to-toe with all the lagoon's living creatures, such as spider crabs and red-eared slider turtles, yellow-rumped warblers and great blue herons.

Although she married at 42 and never had children, Bowman understood them.

Sandy Kahle, founder of Maitland Farm Preschool, calls Bowman the "driving force behind the creation of the ELC. "I was invited to lunch with Maggy and George Bunnell (former ELC president) in March of 1987 and that was it. I was hooked.

"Maggy was adamant that children learn best when their hands and feet get a little wet and dirty, so our educational philosophies meshed from the beginning," says Kahle.

This year, the ELC is offering five different camps with multiple sessions totaling 11 weeks and 154 slots or openings. Camps are for children 4-years-old through those entering seventh grade.

Rosemary Badger, a full-time naturalist and teacher at the ELC, says each camp session has two reserved slots for scholarships.

"But that's flexible. We hope to offer 22 scholarships. We've awarded 13 (this year) so far. We still have scholarships for the Pre-K through third grade camps," Badger says. "Last year we offered 230 slots and awarded 16 Maggy Bowman Scholarships."

The programs

Here's a quick peak at a few:

In Little Wonders (4-years-old, entering pre-K or K) campers dip nets in the freshwater pond, learn about fish and design a turtle.

Campers in Our Living World (children entering second and third grades) go seine netting and identify animals collected from the brackish water.

Marine Safari (children entering sixth and seventh grades) begins with snorkeling practice, then a boat trip to surrounding spoil islands and canoeing through the mysterious mangrove trails.

No traditionalist

Bowman grew up in Rhinebeck, N.Y. When many young women graduated high school, married and began a family, Bowman attended Elmira College, graduating in 1936, and then taught primitive camping skills to Girl Scouts.

When World War II began, she enlisted in the Women's Army Corp and was deployed to Army headquarters in Paris and then Frankfurt. She worked as a cryptographer, encoding and decoding messages sent to and from Army command.

Bowman explained what got her through the war years: She imagined the solo camping trip in the Adirondacks she'd go on when she got home. She wanted to hike alone, pitch a tent and sleep under the stars.

She wanted to drink in the peacefulness. And she did too, for several months, mailing food to herself via rural delivery at nearby post offices.

After the war, Bowman briefly worked as a buyer for B. Altman, the department store on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street in New York City, before returning to Rhinebeck and working at the family's flower business.

Her niece, Donna Anderson, lived over the flower shop and remembers one day in particular.

"When she returned from lunch she announced that she'd gotten married on her lunch hour – never the traditionalist. She'd met John at an archeological dig, a common interest they had," says Anderson.

Audubon founder

In 1964, Bowman and her husband moved here and she became active in founding the Pelican Island Audubon Society, where she met Dr. Richard Baker, its current president. Baker calls her "a giant for conservation in the community."

"Birds were very special to her. She trained many of the best birders in our county," Baker says.

If Bowman were to magically come to life in Vero Beach today, what would she think of our current state of affairs? Baker has some ideas.

"She might be happy that PIAS, after 50 years being homeless, finally has a home for Audubon," Baker says.

He's referring to two major events on one day when PIAS celebrated its 50-year anniversary and the dedication of the new Audubon House on Oslo Road, Sat. April 18. Bowman would've enjoyed the day immensely.

Bowman would also enjoy seeing all the donors, volunteers, pro bono contributors and PIAS board members being honored for their persistence in making Audubon House a reality.

And she'd have been thrilled when PIAS' vice president Bob Bruce read a congratulatory note from Director of Florida Audubon Eric Draper and presented Baker with PIAS's Life Time Achievement award, given only to one other recipient – Maggy Bowman.

Work to do

And what wouldn't she like?

"She would be upset at the County Commissioners' dredge and fill project proposed at Oslo boat ramp against the wishes of the public," says Baker. "She would be horrified at the dire state of global warming and the lack of response of our governor in preparing us for what we will face if the U.S. doesn't work with the world to stop carbon emissions, and his forbidding people from mentioning the words 'global climate change,' or 'warming,'" says Baker.

Finally, Baker believes Bowman would be astounded the Sunshine State doesn't have complete solar producing electrical grids, making us independent of oil and gas, especially when Germany, China and others are doing exactly that.

You can bet that Bowman would want as many children as possible to connect with nature this summer and join the ELC's Ecology Adventures. To learn more visit www.DiscoverELC.org.

Scholarships are still available through the Maggy Bowman Scholarship Fund for Summer 2015. For details, contact ELC naturalist Rosemary Badger at 772-589-5050, extension 108 or Rosemary@DiscoverELC.org.

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