

Caretakers' devotion sustains Unexpected Wildlife Refuge in Buena Vista Township

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By LEE PROCIDA Staff Writer

BUENA VISTA TOWNSHIP — One end of Unexpected Road is lined by homes and a sand mine, the other is circled by vegetable fields and more homes — exactly what you would expect on the border of Atlantic and Gloucester counties.

But in the middle of the half-paved, half-sandy road are lakes surrounded by beaver dams, filled with otters and red-bellied turtles and shaded by trees that shelter deer, foxes, raccoons and bluebirds.

This is the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, owned by a nonprofit of the same title, named after the oddly labeled route that leads to it and maintained through the love of donors and volunteers.

It was founded 50 years ago when two animal enthusiasts bought an 85-acre tract with an abandoned cranberry bog. The preserve is now 767 acres, with land in Buena Vista, Buena Borough and across the county border in Franklin Township, and run by a woman who carries on its naturalist cause.

"The people who support this place really believe in it," said Sarah Summerville, 47, the group's director, who lives in a green cottage by the lily-pad-laden main lake. "They really believe in what this couple was doing."

The founding couple was Cavit and Hope Buyukmihci, who purchased the initial property in 1961 from a retired Vineland educator willing to sell them the land at a cut-rate price if they planned to keep it undeveloped.

"South Jersey is rich with wooded streams and open swamp, fast being gobbled by bulldozers, but desirable places were not for sale at a price we could pay," Hope Buyukmihci wrote immediately after the deal.

"The place will be left wild," she also wrote. "School groups and any other persons interested in the study

of nature will be welcome.... The bluebirds, of course are not aware of all these plans, which they unwittingly brought into existence. But we hope a pair will come by, take a shine to an Unexpected prefab, and spread the word."

The couple could never find out how the road got its name. They originally named it the Adams Unexpected Refuge, after the family that had owned the land before.

Cavit died in 1987, and Hope maintained the refuge until she died in 2001 at age 88.

On Tuesday, the 10-year anniversary of Hope's death, Summerville explained how she came to be the nonprofit's new secretary, treasurer and chief outhouse cleaner.

"I think I found my calling," she said.

Summerville, originally from Butler County, Pa., was working at an environmental firm in Hammonton and was living in Egg Harbor City when she heard about the refuge.

She decided to check it out, quickly became friends with Hope and moved into another home on the property just north on the dirt driveway from the cottage where the Buyukmihcis lived.

Just before her death, Hope appointed Summerville the new director. Afterward, Summerville moved into the cottage, an old, decrepit building used by the former cranberry farm operators. It has a metal roof and wooden beams that still have some bark.

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The non-profit could not offer much compensation — simply a place to live and enough money to make some food for herself and the refuge's visitors.

"There isn't a whole long list of people dumb enough to take that line," Summerville joked. "I'm very low maintenance."

At the same time, she's been highly successful in securing grant money to help expand the refuge, adding nearly 200 acres since taking over a decade ago, owing to her experience in environmental planning.

She also spends her days maintaining the land and its 10 miles of paths, something that had fallen to a cohort of volunteers before she took on the position.

"Sarah changed everything," said Helga Tacreiter, 58, of Hopewell Township, president of the board of directors and a friend of Hope since 1990.

In fact, Summerville has learned skills at the refuge that have proven useful elsewhere, such as when beavers dammed up a creek in Buena Vista and flooded a farmer's land. The township did not know what to do about it, so Summerville guided them through it.

"It's kind of a unique situation to have beaver trouble, you know what I mean?" Mayor Chuck Chiarello said.

Today, Summerville has scores of people willing to patrol the preserve's grounds for hunters, trappers and people who fish, put up birdhouses or cut wood for the cottage's fireplace — many of whom were originally inspired by the Buyukmihci's mission.

Meanwhile, about 400 people visit the preserve a year, including hikers, bird watchers, boy scouts and people just looking to spend a day with the beavers.

It's a little harder to get to these days — the bridge linking Unexpected Road to its Buena Vista half washed out years ago, and the township, county and Summerville all agreed it would be a waste of money to fix the rarely used structure. All traffic must now come in from Piney Hollow Road.

The park currently limits visiting groups to about five people at a time. The Buyukmihci's used to bring in school groups, but they were too large to fit easily along the skinny trails, and there are few bathrooms and limited access for a school bus or multiple vehicles.

But the next project for the non-profit is building an off-the-grid, highly energy-efficient two-story headquarters in place of the cottage, which would be

used as both a living quarters and educational center.

Summerville has already acquired a \$28,000 grant for the architectural costs to partly pay for the design of the project, but estimates actual construction could cost at least \$500,000.

For that, she said, she'll need a much larger grant, but needs to get more of a plan together before she applies. She'll probably also need donations, but said she only does when she has a solid plan in place.

Like Hope Buyukmihci said about the bluebirds she originally wanted to help, the animals in the refuge know little of those plans.

On Tuesday, a red-bellied turtle laid eggs on the bank of the lake and birds' songs sounded over the open space.

Summerville explained that the preserve is first and foremost for the animals.

"It's to give them a place where they're not hunted, trapped or fished," she said.

Because the purpose is animals first, people second, the Unexpected Refuge is still a relatively unknown sanctuary, but that's to be expected.

"It's a large tract and we really don't have anything like it in our township," said Chiarello, "and frankly, if too many people know about it, a lot more people will want to see it."

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