


Lyme Land Trust to be featured on PBS series



"Visionaries" director of photography Bruce Lundeen, left, tapes Jack Tiffany of Tiffany Farm in Lyme. (Photo courtesy of Humphrey Tyler of the Lyme Land Conservation Trust)

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Lyme — Local vistas and stories that explore the history of the Lyme Land Conservation Trust, and what its future could hold, soon will reach a national audience.

The Lyme Land Conservation Trust, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, will be featured on PBS's "Visionaries," a series hosted by Sam Waterston. In Connecticut, the segment on the Land Trust will air at 7 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 14, on Connecticut Public Television.

Film crews interviewed land trust members last winter and then filmed the Lyme Consolidated School's Earth Day Celebration and Tour de Lyme, the land trust's annual bicycling fundraiser.

Land trust members said it was a great opportunity to tell the story of their town, which they revere for its rural beauty, quiet atmosphere and the people within the community.

"It was the greatest gift for all of us to be able to tell a story about the town we love and feel really positive about," said Lyndon Haviland, a volunteer with the land trust.

A 50-year history of conservation

The Lyme Land Conservation Trust began 50 years ago under the vision of a small group of residents who moved from Fairfield County to Lyme. They were hoping to escape the urbanization that was taking place in Fairfield County and wanted to protect Lyme's historical, agricultural and rural atmosphere, said George Moore, the land trust's executive director.

First Selectman Ralph Eno said that at the time the whole state was being developed aggressively in a suburban fashion, and most people weren't thinking about the consequences of that phenomenon, which over time impacted the way the state looks today.

"So these folks were pretty unique in having that perspective of protecting small, rural communities," he said.

The original vision of the land trust was to serve as a vehicle through which people voluntarily could protect their own land, said trust President John Pritchard. Later, the leadership of the land trust realized that it wasn't enough and they would have to be more proactive and buy property coming on to the market to prevent it from being developed.

The relationship between the land trust and the town also grew over time. The land trust used to hold land set aside during the subdivision process, until the town empowered the conservation commission to hold land in the late '80s or early '90s. Around the same time, the town created the Open Space Committee, which enhanced the conservation ethic in town, and the amount of land protected in partnership skyrocketed, Eno said.

The land trust's history also includes stories of grass-roots campaigns among residents to preserve land.

During the program, Volunteers Lyndon Haviland and Penny Smyth, a former board member, tell the story of the campaign among neighbors 10 years ago to save the meadow next to the Grassy Hill Congregational Church, an iconic image often captured in paintings of Lyme. The group received more than 200 donations, from people as far away as the West Coast and France.

In addition to the PBS program and to celebrate its 50th anniversary, the Land Trust raised money to produce a video focusing on the founders and pioneers of the land trust, Moore said.

Next generation

Lyme's children added their voices to the television program, as crews filmed the Lyme Consolidated School's Earth Day celebration, in which students learn outdoors about fish ladders and the environment. The celebration also includes an assembly and lessons with the students in the classroom.

For the past four years, the land trust has been partnering with the school, said parents Eliza Sharp and Emily Bjornberg, who volunteers as a fish ladder coordinator and steward with the land trust.

The land trust began the partnership with the school in recognition that it should engage young people in the effort to conserve land.

"Ultimately, we can set aside all the land we want, but unless we teach the next generations that they also need to fight to protect it, and the reasons why they need to fight to protect it, then our mission rings hollow," Bjornberg said.

Sharp said children today, in general, are conservation-minded and regard the earth and land as something important.

Nolan Smyth, 21, Penny's son, who grew up in Lyme and now attends college in New York, said he thinks the younger generation will be able to build on what the land trust has established so far.

"Going out into the world and coming back, it's been really great to see what Lyme is able to accomplish," Nolan Smyth said. "Growing up, I used to walk in the woods every day and go exploring. I think that's something that was really special in my childhood, and an organization that is willing to protect that is really important."

Legacy

Moore said he hopes viewers watching the program in Lyme will feel a sense of pride about the town they live in and what has been accomplished by the land trust.

"I'm hoping it will also inspire people to play a more active role in the land trust," he said.

He added that the land trust is becoming a role model to other land trusts, as almost half of the households in town are members of the land trust. About half of the land in town has been preserved, with the help of the land trust, along with the state, town, Nature Conservancy and federal government, Moore said.

Bill Mosher, the executive producer and founder of "Visionaries," said his team had been looking to feature a nonprofit working on the local level that might have a replicable model that could be adopted in communities across the country.

"Lyme Land Conservation Trust turned out to be much more than we had imagined," Mosher said by email. "It is an extraordinary example of the power individuals have to create positive change when they think and act locally."

"I hope the viewer will take away the realization that true change is a generational endeavor often requiring years of dedicated action," he added.

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