

Teen's fundraising, other efforts help St. Croix Valley communities

One teen's fundraising typifies a successful effort to aid St. Croix Valley communities.

By Mary Divine

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When the news came out that gifts to the Carpenter Nature Center in south Washington County would be matched through a special challenge grant, Leo Mose started saving his pennies — literally.

Leo, 14, of rural Hudson, Wis., donated a Ziploc bag full of change to the nature center in Denmark Township. His gift of \$50 — "mostly quarters ... they weighed about two pounds," he says — was matched penny for penny.

The Carpenter Nature Center raised more than \$50,000 as part of the St. Croix Valley Foundation's Partners for the Future Initiative.

The nature center was one of 19 nonprofit organizations in the valley that raised \$1.06 million over the past three years; the St. Croix Valley Foundation matched that amount dollar for dollar. All contributions were placed in a permanent fund at the foundation dedicated to each organization.

Leo is a frequent visitor and volunteers at the nature center overlooking the St. Croix River. His house in Town of Troy, Wis., borders land the nature center owns in Wisconsin. His mother, Marsha, is on the nature center's board of directors.

Leo said he hopes his gift will help educate people about the importance of preserving land. "More people are going toward technology and living in cities," he said. "They're not really learning about rural things."

Jim Fitzpatrick, Carpenter's executive director, said Leo's gift set a wonderful example and was an excellent visual aid during board meetings.

"It hit people at the heart level — that here was this kid saving his coins for something," Fitzpatrick said. "He's that kind of a lad. He's kind of quiet. This is the kind of quiet that makes noise."

Donors like Leo are leaving a legacy that will improve the future of the St. Croix River Valley, said David Wettergren, chairman of the foundation's board. Wettergren said more than 1,200 donors participated in the challenge grant.

"Inspiring donors to support the nonprofits that care for our region's people, communities and natural beauty was at the heart of this initiative," Wettergren said.

In order to receive a dollar-for-dollar match, each of the 19 nonprofit organizations that participated had to meet a fundraising goal — ranging from \$25,000 to \$95,000 — over a period of three years. That all 19 successfully met — and, in some cases, exceeded — their goals is remarkable, given today's economic climate, Wettergren said.

The challenge pool was created in part by donations from Hardenbergh Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, Bush Foundation and an anonymous donor who lives in the St. Croix River Valley, said Jill Shannon, the St. Croix Valley Foundation's director of community partnerships.

The nonprofit groups that benefited from the challenge grants span an array of services, including the arts, health, environment, historic preservation and youth development, Shannon said.

Photo captions (photos not available): Recognizing a need to preserve land, Leo Mose, 14, became one of more than 1,200 donors to 19 St. Croix Valley nonprofit groups. By raising money to support the Carpenter Nature Center, he raised \$50, one penny at a time. (Pioneer Press: Scott Takushi)

The \$50,000 raised by the Carpenter Nature Center and matched dollar-for-dollar by the St. Croix Valley Foundation will benefit the center and land preservation efforts, assuring visits such as this by children from Afton Preschool will continue. (Pioneer Press: Jean Pieri)

Afton Preschool students, from left, Lance Hedrick, Carl Gross and Cole Talledge search for rabbits last week at Carpenter Nature Center. They listened to a naturalist read about rabbits, then colored bunny ears and drew a rabbit before the hunt. Before leaving, they were able to see and touch a rabbit. (Pioneer Press: Jean Pieri)

Before going into the visitors center, children from Afton Preschool explore a Carpenter Nature Center water garden. Nineteen nonprofit organizations raised more than \$1 million that will support a wide range of activities, including the arts, health, environment, historic preservation and youth development. (Pioneer Press: Jean Pieri)

Richard Gauger, executive director of the West Wisconsin Land Trust in Menomonie, Wis., said the gifts received as part of the challenge grant will ensure that his organization "will be around to preserve and sustain the wild and scenic places in western Wisconsin, along the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers, for generations to come."

His favorite donor story involves Harald "Hal" Simonsen, 71, a retired mailman who lives on St. Paul's West Side, who donated his \$36,000 retirement account from the U.S. Postal Service to the land trust.

Simonsen said he often takes his two grandchildren — Samantha, 10, and Rebecca, 11 — on drives along the Great River Road in western Wisconsin.

"We always stop at Diamond Head, and we see eagles and falcons," he said. "It's just a stunning drive. To me it rivals the North Shore or the California coast. This is something I treasure, and that I can see. There's so little of this beautiful land left. It's got to be preserved. Once it's gone, it's gone. It's heartwarming to think that something I've done will help to preserve this."

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