

50 years of outdoor education

Friday, March 4, 2011

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THE RECORD
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Joyce Zeiller still remembers a day in the 1960s when she took the new director of the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center on a tour of the 60-acre property.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TENAFLY NATURE CENTER

Donald Zeiller, left, president of the Tenafly Nature Center from 1965 to 1968, with Tom Reisner in 1966.

"I took him on a hike along one of the trails, and we came around a bend and I really didn't expect to come upon a snake on the path, swallowing a frog," Zeiller said, laughing at her own fright. "That was violence I was not sure I could deal with!"

For 50 years now, the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center has provided North Jersey residents a chance to make their own shocking discoveries about the natural world around them.

The center, which incorporated as a non-profit in 1961, added 274 acres in 1976. Now, with more than 1,000 educational programs, a 2-acre pond and seven miles of hiking trails, the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center attracts about 23,000 visitors a year.

On Sunday, supporters will celebrate the center's 50th anniversary with a gala dinner at the Clinton Inn in [Tenafly](#).

"The center has provided great memories from all seasons," said Michael Neus, the board president. During a birthday party at the center when his son was 6, it started to snow and the boys took a hike out to Pfister's Pond, which was frozen solid. "The snow was falling gently, and the boys were out on the pond having a snowball fight," Neus said. "It's a moment I'll never forget."

"I love to look at the pond, which is different every day," said interim Director Ellen Kuhn. "I'm never left unrewarded. I can't believe there's such beautiful open space just 10 minutes from New York City."

The original 60 or so acres for what would be known as a "Green Island in [Tenafly](#)," were cobbled together as the borough swapped parcels scattered around East Hill, land it obtained when owners could not pay their taxes.

Volunteers had to clean up the newly acquired property. "People had used it as a dump, and there was all kinds of junk," Zeiller recalled. "We cleaned out old refuse from gardens, old motors dug out of the pond, old boots."

In 1966, a building named after John A. Redfield, one of the center's early trustees, opened with classrooms, exhibits and office space. One corner of the building houses a small menagerie of native animals. Outside, in large cages, live a barred owl and two red-tailed hawks. The raptors, which had been injured and could no longer survive in the wild, now make visits to schools.

Donald Zeiller, a former trustee who died in 2009, once said that "every plant and animal is a teaching tool. There are textbooks in rotting logs, wildflowers and raccoons. There is an encyclopedia of wonders in Pfister's Pond."

The nature center expanded dramatically in 1976, when the borough raised \$9.3 million to purchase 274 acres from Centex Homes of Texas, which had proposed a 1,780-unit housing project on the site. A prior owner had proposed cluster housing projects and a high-rise office building, and in the late 1960s the woodland was considered as a site for an antiballistic missile installation.

Neus said the original band of volunteers and town officials made [Tenafly](#) "a leader in environmental awareness and action at a time when unchecked development threatened the last remaining open spaces in [Bergen County](#)."

[Alpine](#) Mayor Paul Tomasko will receive the center's 2011 Founders Award at the gala Sunday.

Tickets are \$100 per person, with proceeds going toward the center's mission of environmental education.

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