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FEATURED

Nature's steward, dog lover made impact

BY MARY WICOFF mwicoff@dancomnews.com Sep 23, 2017



Commercial-News File PhotoMarilyn Campbell, right, introduces a client at Danville's VA Illiana Health Care System to Hannah, her therapy dog. Campbell, a long-time area resident, died Thursday.



DANVILLE — Animal lovers and nature enthusiasts had a friend in Marilyn Campbell of Georgetown.

The conservationist, avid birder and dog trainer made an impact on Vermilion County, as well as the state, and will be greatly missed, friends said Friday.

Campbell, 76, died early Thursday at Colonial Manor Nursing Home after an illness. No services are planned now, but a memorial service will be held later.

"She was a good steward of the gifts she was given," said Paula Hurst, a friend who helped Campbell evaluate therapy dogs. "People need to be aware of the contributions she made."

"She was one of the smartest people I ever met," said Ken Konsis, executive director of the Vermilion County Conservation District. Birds were her specialty and she knew a lot about them, he said, adding, "I admired her for that."

"She was just amazing," fellow birder and photographer Bob Schifo of Catlin said. "She was a very sympathetic person. I'm going to miss her greatly."

Campbell used to take her collie, Hannah, to the Veterans Affairs Illiana Health Care System to cheer the veterans and staff.

"We are just heartbroken," said Jennifer Sheehan-Wells, voluntary service specialist at the VA. "The staff and veterans alike will miss seeing Marilyn and Hannah walking the halls of VA Illiana."

In summing up her friend's life, Mary Ann Hoeffliger of Effingham said, "If you want to honor Marilyn, take care of the earth and be a friend."

AN EDUCATOR

A native of Terre Haute, Ind., Campbell graduated from Indiana State University. She taught classes at Danville Junior College, and was chairman of the biological science department. She held a master's degree with a concentration on ornithology.

In fact, Schifo said that's how he became involved in birding. He started at the college in fall 1968, and took botany and zoology classes from Campbell.

One day, a pretty bird hit a classroom window, and Schifo told his classmates, "That's a rose-breasted grosbeak." His friends didn't believe him, so they took the bird to Campbell, who confirmed the identity.

Later, Campbell contacted Schifo about joining the Audubon Society, and that started his life interest in ornithology.

When Hurst was a student at the college, she heard Campbell was a strict teacher, and so avoided those classes. Six or seven years ago, she met Campbell at the Danville Family YMCA, and that started a friendship.

NATURE LOVER

In 1969, Campbell was hired by the conservation district, and in 1972, became its first director of education and programs. The outdoor school program started with a couple of schools at Forest Glen Preserve, and has grown to seven-week programs at two parks, attracting more than 80,000 children over the years, Konsis said.

The classes continue her legacy of environmental education.

Forest Glen was a fledgling park at the time, and much had to be done, including building trails, monitoring the animal population and inventorying plants.

Campbell put together a staff of naturalists, including Brian Baldwin, Mark Pittman, Gary Wilford and Steve Weller, to get the park in shape.

Konsis was on the maintenance staff in 1987, when Campbell asked him to help with the outdoor school. That led to other jobs, leading up to executive director.

"I owe my career to her," Konsis said. In addition, Campbell hired his wife, Lorna, who also held various positions.

Campbell also served as consultant for the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, and spearheaded the process to obtain protected nature preserve status for four Illinois nature preserves within Forest Glen and two at Kennekuk County Park.

Campbell, the third person hired at Forest Glen, became deputy director, interim executive director and associate director before retiring in 1994.

In addition, Campbell worked with Doris Westfall to restore the prairie at Forest Glen, which has Westfall's name. The two conservationists wrote a 68-page booklet, "The Prairie in Vermilion County."

BIRD LOVER

When she left the conservation district, Campbell became executive director of the Illinois Audubon Society. While people associate the society with birds, its mission is broader than that, as it strives to help people appreciate the flora and fauna of Illinois.

Campbell spearheaded land acquisitions for the protection of threatened and endangered species, and was overseer of 10 sanctuaries in Illinois.

After retiring in 2006, she was editor of the Illinois Audubon magazine until 2014.

She held all positions in the Middlefork Chapter of the Audubon Society, most recently as a board member.

Campbell was the go-to expert on bird issues in the county, and was involved in annual bird counts for the Audubon Society.

In recent years, she was active as an educator, naturalist, nature photographer and writer.

DOG LOVER

In 1993, Campbell became a certified evaluator for Therapy Dogs International — the only one in the area, Hurst said.

Campbell adopted Hannah from Indiana Collie Rescue about four years ago, and would visit the VA four times a month.

Sheehan-Wells said Campbell was an integral part of the VA volunteer pet therapy program for the past three and a half years.

"Not only has she brightened the lives of our veterans by her faithful visits with Hannah, her collie, but she urged her friends to join our volunteer program," she said.

"It was apparent she grew attached to the veterans by her determination to continue visiting throughout her illness."

In an interview a couple of years ago, Campbell said, "I enjoy going out and interacting with (the veterans), and helping them have a good day." She also took Hannah to nursing homes and to Danville Area Community College.

In late 2015, Campbell was honored by the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund for her work with therapy dogs. As one of seven finalists, she received \$100 for the charity of her choice, which she donated to Feed the Children Backpack program, which serves seven Danville schools.

She has certified more than 200 dogs in central Illinois and Indiana.

A FRIEND

Campbell also enjoyed traveling, especially taking bird-watching expeditions to other countries, and collecting owl-themed figurines and objects. She kept meticulous journals of her travels, said Hoeffliger, who traveled with her.

Hoeffliger met Campbell in 1991 when she lived in Danville and attended an Audubon Society meeting. Hoeffliger later was president of the Illinois Audubon Society.

While Campbell is known for her conservation and animal activities, people noted that she was a good friend, as well.

Hoeffliger said, "For a person who didn't enjoy crowds, she had so many friends. And she was loyal to her friends."

Schifo said, "She was always there to help a friend in need. She's the type of person we should all strive to be."

Campbell leaves a sister and nephew in Indiana, and a niece in New York.

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