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*Saint Edward's School bids adieu
to Karen and Mike Mersky*

A DECADE OF DEDICATION







The 187-acre Lagoon Greenway has a public trail for hiking or bicycling.

A Living Trust

THE INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST IS DOING ITS PART TO KEEP OUR COUNTY GREEN

BY CHRIS FASOLINO

Mangroves, salt marshes, tropical oak hammocks, pine flatwoods, wetlands, shoreline and islands: These are among the environments protected by the Indian River Land Trust. The work of the Land Trust is illustrative of the rich variety of habitats found in the Vero Beach area and the importance of preserving such places for the future.

Established in 1990, the Land Trust saved McKee Botanical Garden, then called McKee Jungle Gardens, through a 10-year project for the purchase and restoration of the iconic Vero Beach site. The garden is now protected in perpetuity by an easement. Today, the Land Trust is focused on acquiring environmentally valuable land to protect it from development. Its mission is summed up with three key goals: “Preserve environmentally important land and water resources; protect scenic waterfront areas; provide access for public recreation and education.”

How do you begin to meet those goals? Much of the work began with a map. “When we started out, we had a mapping project done,” says Ann Alleva Taylor, the director of marketing and philanthropy for the Land Trust. The map combined state and local data to show “where the best habitats were,” taking into account “habitat value, open space value and development pressure.” This process would allow the Land Trust to “prioritize what properties to acquire, if there were willing sellers.”

In other words, it was an ecological treasure map, and it showed the places where “X” should mark the spot.

That map continues to point the way for the future projects of the Land Trust. “Our hope is that in the next five years, we will be able to acquire all the

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Bee Gum Point serves as a rest stop for several species of migratory birds.

remaining property not yet developed for conservation,” says Taylor.

The acquisition of land is inevitably tied not only to donations and support but also to the vagaries of the real estate market. Ken Grudens, the Land Trust’s executive director, explains how the national economy has factored into the Land Trust’s history. “In 2009, the economy had taken a turn for the worse.” The silver lining to that situation was that property became less expensive — and more likely to be available.

The crisis also presented an opportunity, Grudens says, “to focus on the lagoon.” Protecting waterfront property, and thereby helping to protect the lagoon itself, became a priority for the Land Trust.

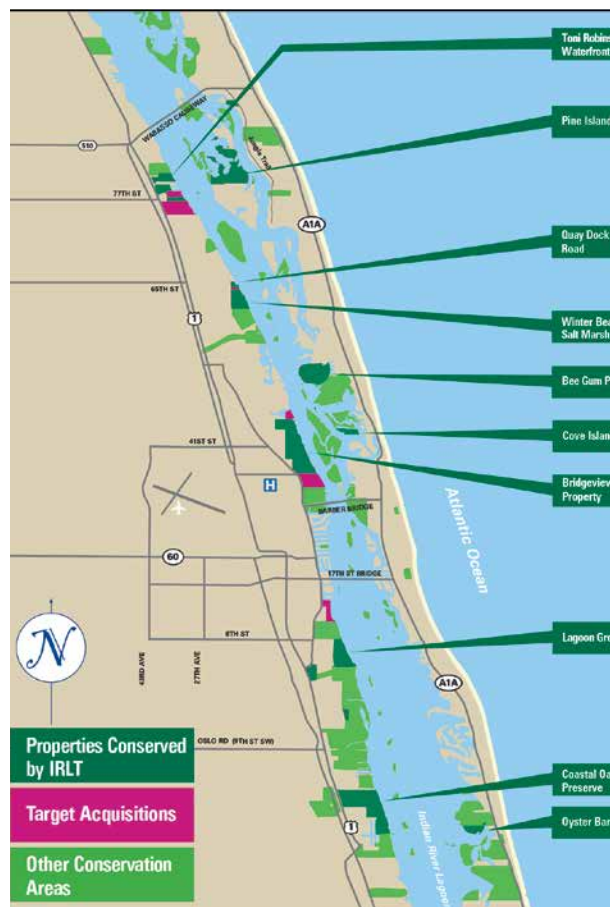
The building of alliances has been another key strategy. “We have over a dozen active partnerships,” Grudens notes. The Land Trust works with various state and local government agencies, nonprofit organizations and research institutions. For example, educational opportunities are provided through partnerships with the Gifford Youth Achievement Center, the School District of Indian River County, Ballet Vero Beach and Florida Atlantic University’s Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. The Junior Scientist Fellows Program is just one example. It allows dedicated high school students to work on real scientific research, through a







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partnership with Harbor Branch.

Additionally, fisheries research has been conducted through a partnership with Florida Institute of Technology and the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust. Studies of the diamondback terrapin have been conducted with Florida Tech and the Department of Environmental Protection. Both the fisheries and turtle studies have been funded by the Land Trust's Ladies of the Lagoon, who work to support efforts to protect the Indian River Lagoon.

The rich variety of habitats that the Land Trust seeks to preserve is exemplified by its Lagoon Greenway. Located at the corner of 8th Street and Indian River Boulevard, the 187-acre property features a public trail for hiking or bicycling. The trail begins by meandering through

oak and palm hammocks that blend together as the different types of trees intermingle. Many of the towering oaks are draped with Spanish moss. Native seashore mallow, which bears a flower with a bright yellow center surrounded by soft pink petals, grows in abundance. Wild coffee grows just off the trail, as does American beauty berry, with its distinctive light purple coloring. Many white peacock butterflies, with their intricately patterned wings, fly amongst the foliage, as do monarchs and other species of Lepidoptera. Red-bellied woodpeckers and cardinals are among the birds that can be seen on this part of the trail, and some hikers report having spotted the vibrant and beautiful plumage of the painted bunting.

The hammocks comprise the

Ken Grudens updates the Land Trust's Ladies of the Lagoon on their annual pontoon boat tour.





Dave Fuss, Ann Alleva Taylor and Ken Grudens are proud of the Land Trust's accomplishments on the Lagoon Greenway project.

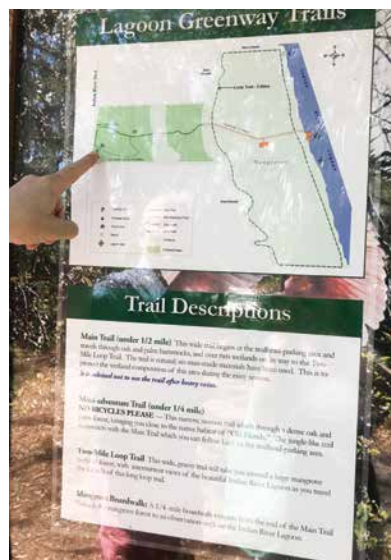
uplands portion of the Lagoon Greenway; as the trail moves closer to the shore, it dips in elevation and there is a corresponding change in habitat. Conditions became wetter, allowing for mangroves to flourish. The trail leads to a boardwalk traversing a mangrove swamp. Vast numbers of all three Florida mangrove varieties — black, white and red — are found in these swamplands, their intricate root structures defining a distinctive environment. The boardwalk leads to water's edge, where the "walking trees" stand comfortably on the brackish shores of the lagoon. The elegant form of a wading bird, such as a little blue heron, can sometimes be seen striding along the rails of the boardwalk itself, as if it, too, is enjoying the trail. Indeed,

mangrove swamps serve as havens for numerous species of herons and egrets.

Yet another distinctive element of Lagoon Greenway is the "Mini Adventure Trail" that branches off from the main trail in the uplands region. This narrow, winding trail is deliberately kept wilder and less cleared. Grudens says it was added "to emulate a wilderness experience for the more adventurous of hikers." He adds, "It was inspired by trails such as the Florida Trail and the Appalachian Trail." It was an ingenious idea, and the trail offers a great sense of adventure and immersion in nature.

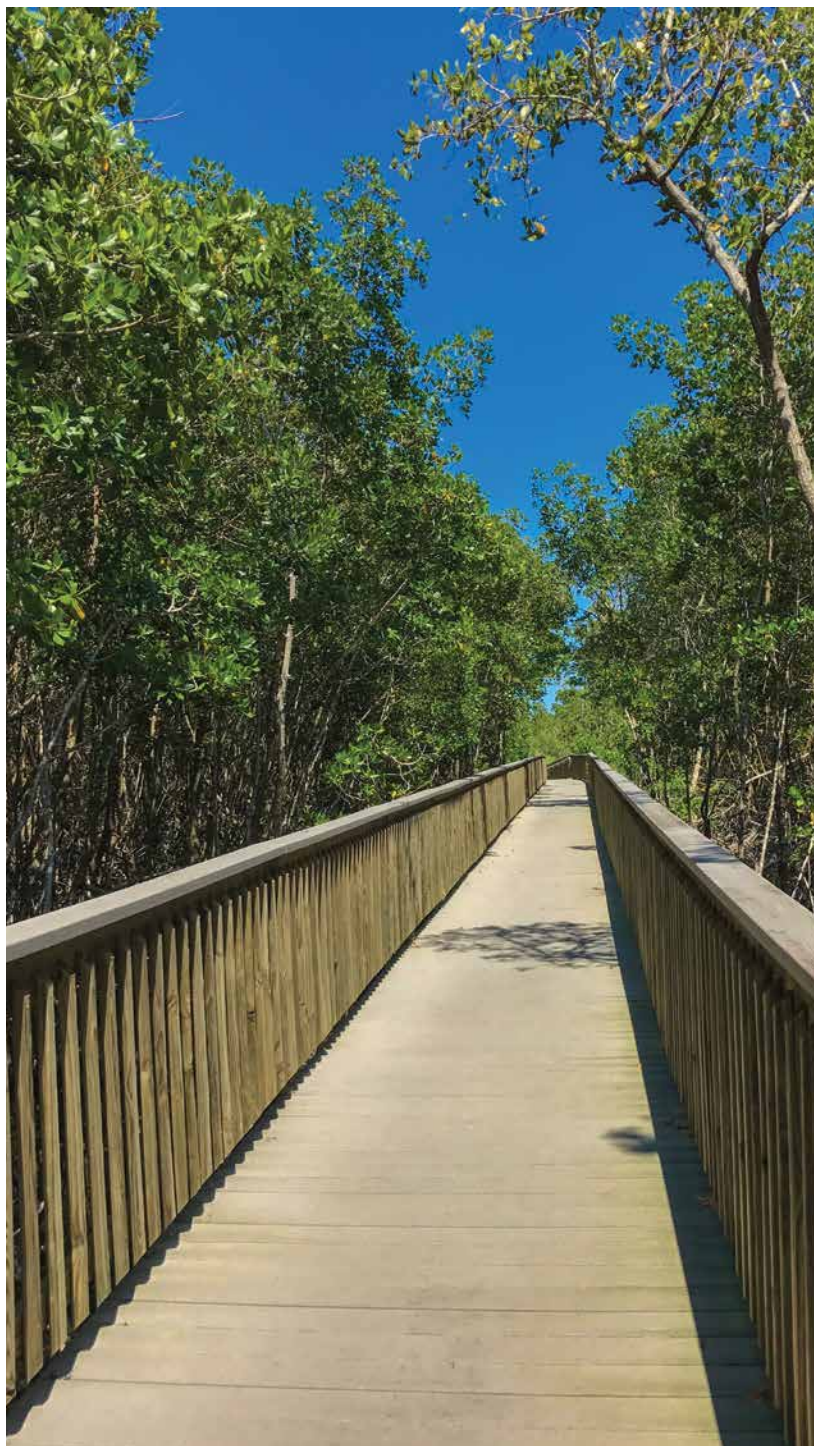
While the variety of habitats within Lagoon Greenway is amazing, some Land Trust projects were designed to focus on a single habitat

Trail maps at the site help visitors plan their hike.



that is under threat and needs to be preserved. Such is the case with Winter Beach Salt Marsh, a property that contains one of Indian River County's last intact salt marshes. Dave Fuss, the director of land stewardship, explains the ecological importance of this site: "Historically, this was part of a large, continuous block of high salt marsh, which has habitat value for a number of species."

A key example is the black rail, the population of which has been in serious decline "due to a dearth of salt marsh habitats." The black rail is a small and reclusive wading bird. Its black and brown feathers are streaked and spotted with white, and it has bright ruby-red eyes. In his "Birds of America," John James Audubon included a beautiful image



The boardwalk at the Lagoon Greenway leads to magnificent Lagoon views.

of the black rail in its natural marsh habitat. He managed this despite the fact that he had never seen the species in its natural habitat; in fact, he had never seen a living black rail at all. Audubon wrote that his knowledge came exclusively from

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The Bill and Laura Buck bench honors the couple's long-standing commitment to the Land Trust.

specimens provided by a friend whose father had reportedly shot the birds near New Orleans. The fact that even Audubon never managed to glimpse a black rail in the wild is testament in itself to their limited population and their secretive nature. Today, with the salt marsh habitat under threat, that limited population is cause for concern, and during the past year, proposals have been made to list the eastern black rail as a threatened species. This fact underscores the value of preserving salt marsh habitat.

Another Land Trust property important to birds is Bee Gum Point, located off Fred Tuerk Drive. Here, the focus is on migratory birds. The 111 acres of Bee Gum Point provide a place of refuge for migrants of a variety of species during their great journeys along the Atlantic

flyway. Fuss explains that the land was “actually slated for some development” before the economic downturn in 2009 allowed for it to be purchased and preserved, in this case with the help of a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There is no unmonitored public access at Bee Gum Point; “this one is essentially a wildlife and bird sanctuary,” Fuss says. However, during the fall and winter, there are birdwatching tours at Bee Gum Point that anyone can sign up for. Sightings have included a variety of migratory warblers; waders, including night herons; bald eagles; ospreys and roseate spoonbills. In view of its significance for many species of birds, Bee Gum Point is also used by the Audubon Society for population studies.

The Coastal Oaks Preserve is the



The remaining Bridgeview Property is on the Land Trust's wish list.

focus of some intriguing plans for the future and illustrates the kind of strategic improvements the Land Trust is interested in making to some of its holdings. The area of the preserve nearest the road consists of fallow land that used to be a citrus grove and became overgrown with invasive species such as the Brazilian pepper plant and the Australian pine. “We acquired the property and got rid of the invasive species,” Fuss explains. “Our goal is to turn the fallow area into a hardwood swamp.”

For this project, the Land Trust is working with the Florida Department of Transportation, which is required to provide mitigation for wetland loss due to road construction, by creating or restoring wetlands. The Coastal Oaks Preserve project will offset a new interchange the FDOT built on I-95 in Brevard County.

Coastal Oaks Preserve is located near the Indian River County Conservation Lands sites on Oslo Road, adding to its merit from an environmental standpoint. Indeed, one of the factors the Land Trust considers in making acquisitions is whether there is already other conservation land nearby; if there is, that is considered advantageous because it makes for adjoining, or nearly adjoining, parcels of protected land. Fuss explains, “The larger the contiguous block of habitat, the better it is for species.”

While the hardwood swamp is still in the planning stages, Coastal Oaks Preserve already includes beautiful and valuable habitat. Between the fallow area and the shores of the lagoon are thriving pine flatwoods and tropical oak hammocks, transitioning into rich

mangrove swamps. The uplands portion had been marked for development. “We saved it from 545 homes,” Taylor recalls.

Today, botanical life at the preserve includes the yellow water canna, with its cheery, canary-colored flowers; the saw palmetto; wild grapes and wild coffee. Numerous epiphytes — “air plants” — grow upon the trees. Butterflies include the red admiral and the black swallowtail. Herons thrive at Coastal Oaks Preserve; in fact, there are heron rookeries there. Other birds include red-tailed hawks, ibises, egrets and killdeer (the brave little birds that feign a broken wing to draw potential predators away from their nests).

The Land Trust plans to work with partners to provide access in the form of organized programs



Shady trails beckon visitors to linger and explore Land Trust properties.

for youth and families at Coastal Oaks Preserve and is considering an intriguing kind of trail: a raised canopy walkway. Fuss notes that this arrangement would give future visitors “a different view of the forest — a bird’s perspective.”

A new trail system is also planned for Oyster Bar Marsh, a Land Trust property that includes mangroves as well as lagoon shoreline and is noted for its beautiful views of the water; the trail system there will lead to overlooks so that visitors can enjoy those

vistas. The trail is being developed in a partnership with Indian River County, and it will also include educational displays about the native plants and animals.

The goal of preserving lagoon shore is also exemplified by the Bridgeview Property, which protects 2 miles of green shoreline visible from the Barber Bridge. Meanwhile, the Cove Island site is an island within the lagoon — part of the Lost Tree Archipelago, originally owned by the Lost Tree Village Corporation, which developed John’s Island.

The Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail is a Land Trust property that is open to the public, with a parking lot accessible from 79th Street, east of U.S. Highway 1. This trail begins with Florida scrub, an important habitat for birds such as the aptly named Florida scrub jay. Green anole lizards, with their key-lime colored scales, can be spotted here, as can lepidopterans such as the red admiral, common buckeye and white peacock. The scrub gives way to mangroves as the trail continues. Eventually, its dusty pathway winds its way to a boardwalk overlooking a mangrove swamp. Here, visitors can enjoy a beautiful sense of immersion in the rich tropical environment, as the branches of the mangroves reach out to form a green canopy over the boardwalk.

The boardwalk leads to the shores of the lagoon. There, a wooden dock with a bench at its far end provides a place to contemplate the blue waters and their reflection of white clouds. Visitors may spot a graceful heron at the edge of the mangrove swamp or an agile cormorant diving into the waters. Like the Lagoon Greenway, the Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail shows the variety of habitats the Land Trust is seeking to preserve — and it often allows a glimpse of the species of fauna that benefit from such places of refuge.

Long-term protection and preservation is central to the purpose of the Land Trust, says Fuss. The idea is to make sure these places “cannot be snatched up and developed when no one’s looking.”

With their varied habitats, natural beauty and special role as homes and havens for fascinating plants and animals, the Land Trust sites are indeed treasures worth protecting, now and in the future. ☘