

A Tribute to Helen Black

Nature Center mourns the loss of its greatest advocate



Treasured friend, nature educator, mentor, advocate, environmental crusader, Helen Black was a force beyond words and a presence ahead of her time. Long before the ‘green movement’ there was Helen Black, fighting fiercely to save an endangered wildflower or protecting an acre of pristine prairie from encroaching development.

Helen was one of the twelve naturalists who joined Stanley M. Rowe, Sr. in founding Cincinnati Nature Center in 1965. She also played an instrumental role in the founding and work of many other conservation organization including: Edge of Appalachia Preserve, Little Miami Inc., Cincinnati Museum of Natural History (Museum Center), The Nature Conservancy (Ohio and Maine), Indian Hill Green Areas, Greenacres Foundation, Cincinnati Wildflower Preservation Society and The Hillside Trust. Cincinnati is a better place in part thanks to the tireless work of Helen.

Helen’s passion for nature can be traced to her younger days at the Lotspeich School in Cincinnati where a teacher led her class on walks several days a week. So inspired by this way of connecting children to nature, as an adult, Helen went on to lead her own nature walks for children at Cincinnati Country Day School and eventually was one of the first nature guides to lead school groups through the forests and fields of Cincinnati Nature Center.

Throughout her life, Helen remained a true friend and great advocate of Cincinnati Nature Center serving on the board of trustees, with several action committees, as a volunteer and generous financial supporter. Whether at a board meeting, leading a birder’s hike, planting native Paw Paw trees around the Krippendorf Lodge or removing invasive species, Helen loved the Nature Center with her mind, heart and her hands. Her unique spirit and unbridled enthusiasm for all things living was utterly contagious and over the years she provided

the inspiration for thousands to become advocates for the environment as well.

According to Bill Hopple, Executive Director of Cincinnati Nature Center, her influence was very personal, “I am one of many whose love of nature was cultivated by Helen over many years. It began in elementary school when she would walk our 6th grade class through the woods, discovering flora and fauna and collecting fossils in the stream. Forty years later, Helen continued to inspire and teach me. The impact on my life was profound and Helen greatly contributed to my 23-year career at the Nature Center.”

In honor of Helen’s lifelong work in conservation and land stewardship the Nature Center established the Helen C. Black Conservation Fund in 2012 at its inaugural Wood Thrush Award dinner in which Helen was recognized for a lifetime of dedication to conservation. It was at this time the Nature Center asked those who knew Helen to send in letters and photos about her. Hundreds of fond memories were collected. Two words—enthusiasm and passion—were found in almost every story received. Helen’s enthusiasm and passion for nature were an inseparable part of her being. Her love of, and dedication to nature and land excited others about wildlife, trees, flowers and preserving our land for future generations. This particular story recalled a time when Helen led a group on a hike:

...it was impossible to keep up with her as she scurried over the rolling terrain as fast as a young deer. Occasionally she would pause for a wildflower or to enjoy a vista. But I was breathless trying to follow her. She was like a butterfly sailing free above a pasture. In the fields and on the hillside she was in the world she loved and it energized her and made her light. She seemed to float along while the rest of us—my wife, her husband, me and a few others—dragged along behind... But all of us, I think, appreciated her passion for nature. Seeing someone doing what they truly love is beautiful.

Helen undoubtedly will be sorely missed here every day. She was a treasured friend, nature educator, mentor, advocate, environmental crusader... and lover of Cincinnati Nature Center. 🌿