

# FRIENDS Connection

THE NEWSLETTER OF FRIENDS OF THE KICKAPOO VALLEY RESERVE • (608) 625-2960 • kickapoofriends.org • Volume 17, Issue 2

## Ron Johnson, a Man Who Speaks His Mind

Ron Johnson has very definite opinions. If you don't know that, you don't know the Ron Johnson who recently retired after 25 years as chairman of the KVR Management Board, following six years working on the transfer of the Reserve land from the Corps of Engineers.

He's from Berwick, Pa., and met his wife Donna at a freshman dance at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. "She avoided me for two years and once called me a leech," he admits. But when he finally won her over, they married and moved to New Mexico and lived on a Zuni reservation. He taught one year with his degree in art education and began learning silver-smithing.

Donna is from Onalaska, but her mother was raised on Weister Creek, and Donna spent many summers here with her cousins in La Farge and Hillsboro. Her grandparents were Harold and Carol ("Ma and Pa") Dorschied. Donna and Ron came to help them harvest their tobacco in 1970, and have been in the Kickapoo Valley ever since. They spent a month living in her Aunt Beck's house after her aunt sold to the Dam Project and moved out. Then they rented an abandoned house that didn't have plumbing or insulation, for \$20 a month.

Seven years later they bought the house with 86 acres, where they still live. Just as they added on, put indoor plumbing in and renovated, a patron lady, who was 95% of their income, stopped buying his jewelry pieces. "We got through it," Johnson recalls. "Local business helped by extending us credit. The grocer would just say, 'I know you, don't worry.' That's why we like it here. There are good folks in the Valley."

"I didn't come here because of the beauty of the area though I liked the land because it has hills," he says. "It was Donna's roots, and I liked the people. They waved even though I was a hippie with long hair and a beard down to my belly."

The Reserve land was in limbo: The Corps of Engineers had purchased the homesteads from the people who'd farmed there, but after plans to build a dam were ditched, the Corps didn't know what to do with the land so it was an unmanaged dumping ground



and underage-party place. Johnson got involved when state leaders began the effort to get the land back under local control. "They wanted local people to tell them what we wanted and for us to come up with a management plan," he says. There was a deadline, he recalls, so the transfer had to be done on a certain night though it was raining and storming.

During his tenure, there have been many battles over the use of Reserve land. One of the most contentious was over ATV use. "They were tearing it up, with no respect for the land," Johnson says. "We ended up asking the Corps to eliminate the ATVs. Some people still hate me today for that. But I believe the board's most important duties are to preserve and protect the land, enhance some, well-maintain the trails, and offer programs and events that people can do."

He supported keeping the Reserve campsites primitive, partially, he says, to give local people the opportunity to develop campgrounds.

"I could have lived without opening the campsites (during the Pandemic)," he says of a recent board recent action. "Until then, there hadn't been any Covid cases and I didn't want to bring it here. And I didn't want to put the extra work and risk on the crew." He says he understands that people from outside the Driftless need a place to be outside and enjoy nature. "But they chose (to live in a city), and I chose this. I'm not big on encouraging people, even without a pandemic. I'm not anti-tourism, but I'm not going to cater to them."

Johnson said he never voted except to break a tie during his years as chairman. "But I let the board know where I stood," he says, recalling his stance against plaques for major donors to the current Discovery Center fund-raising. "I didn't see the need for it. If people really love the Reserve, they just donate." But he said he is glad the board decided to put the names on one plaque rather than throughout the exhibit area.

"Yes, it is true that I dig in my heels," Johnson says. "I oppose a view if I don't think it's valid. That's where I've become a  
*continued on page 3*



## The Time was Right – Garden Walk Coordinator Julie Hoel

The idea of a KVR Garden Walk had been bouncing around in my mind for several years. I had attended similar events in Cashton, Westby, Elroy and Viroqua. They were very pleasant affairs and successful fundraisers. I had also seen some beautiful gardens tended by various Friends of KVR. The potential was there, but the timing was never right due to the difficulty of finding volunteers in the summer. Typically 30-35 Friends show up to volunteer for the Spring Fling, the Pasta Supper and the Holiday Happening. As many as 100 people volunteer for Winterfest and the Dam Challenge. But we struggled to find folks willing to work at the Traditional Wisdom event which was held at the end of July the last two years.

Then along came Covid-19. Whenever I asked people what they had been doing since the quarantine, they said, “Working in the garden!” I was sure that those usually

beautiful gardens were going to look better than ever. When Spring Fling was cancelled and the likelihood of having the Pasta Supper and the Holiday Happening looked doubtful, it was clear the time for the Garden Walk was NOW! The KVR gardeners encouraged me and promised to help with ticket taking for the event. Erica at the Visitor Center agreed to help with publicity. All that was needed was willing garden hosts.

After some difficulty, I rounded up seven private gardens plus three public gardens at the KVR, La Farge Public Library and Palen Park in Ontario. Two Friends began sewing masks, we ordered up some signs, articles were written, and maps were drawn. Several local businesses agreed to be included on the map. Posters went up and the word was put out on social media. Ticket purchases began to trickle in. Best of all, volunteers were available this year and began to sign up for shifts.

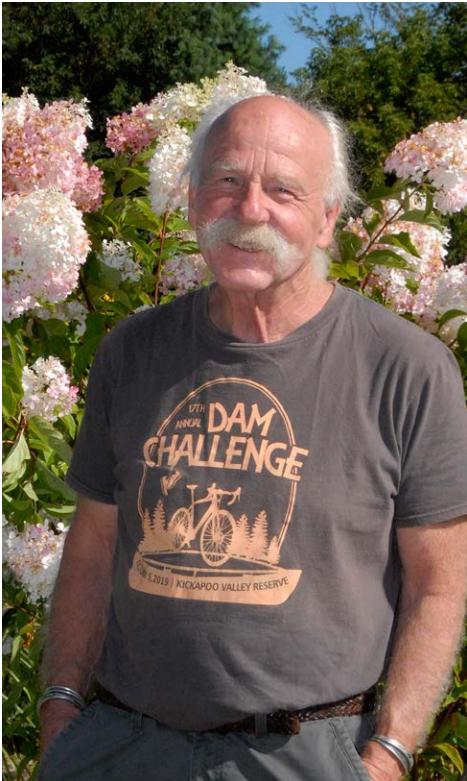


The days leading up to the event were very hot and there was a deluge of rain on Tuesday. But the days of the Walk were perfect! The event unfolded even better than I had imagined. Visitors came from near and far, but the crowd was just the right size to provide ample social distancing, parking and time to chat with the garden hosts. The maps and signs were adequate and no one got lost. Participants said they appreciated the variety of the gardens and the opportunity to be outside in such gorgeous settings.



If you were among the visitors, thanks for coming. If you missed this event, fear not because there are MANY more spectacular gardens in the Kickapoo Valley. The KVR Gardeners are already thinking about how to showcase them next summer.

*Julie Hoel is the immediate past president of KVR Friends and current co-chair of fundraising for the Discovery Center. She lives in Ontario with her husband Gil.*



## A Man Who Speaks His Mind

*continued from page 1*

curmudgeon. There's a lot of people who will say, 'Finally!' that I'm off the board."

"I'd become more of a grouch, and I wanted to stay home. I was tired of having to go out at 6-7 o'clock three or four times a week," he says. "I want more time to work on our house and grounds and it's nice I don't have to worry. I just want to enjoy my peace and quiet and my cerveza."

But Johnson admits he's concerned the board may move toward more development in the Reserve now that he's gone. "To me, local people weren't into development," he says. "The Dells get lots of development, but would you want to live there?"

*Contributor Joan Kent is a retired journalist who lives in La Farge with her husband Don and their cats Liza and Misty.*

## Our Story Still Continues...

The campaign to raise money to upgrade our exhibit space at the Visitor Center is still in progress. The Covid 19 pandemic has definitely had an impact. The celebratory event to honor the 100 Extraordinary Friends who have pledged a minimum of \$1000 has been cancelled twice! But the need for the upgrade is still there. More people than ever have been enjoying the beauty of KVR and this new exhibit will be designed to enhance their outdoor experience.

We received a wonderful \$25,000 donation from Vernon Communications in June, and several memorials and honorary contributions have come in. If you have made a pledge, please send your donation to KVR Friends as you are able. Donations to the project are tax deductible and can be made over a three year period. Follow this link for more information.

<http://kickapoovalley.wi.gov/About-Us/Visitor-Center/Exhibit-Upgrade>

*Julie Hoel is campaign co-chair for Discovery Center fundraising*

## Cookies, No Matter What!

**The KVR Friends' Holiday Happening will happen** this year, in abbreviated form due to Covid-19. Cookies, baguettes, wreaths and holiday decorations will be sold on Saturday, December 5 from 10 am to 3 pm. If there is a blizzard, the sale will be held Sunday, December 6. The change would be announced on the Friends Facebook page and WVRQ radio as soon as possible.

Bags of a half dozen homemade cookies of the same type will be available for \$3, and baguettes made by Friends chef Joanne Shird will also be available for \$3. In addition, evergreen wreaths with red bows, plus holiday decorations made by KVR Friends will be sold.

A sign-up sheet for bakers and volunteers to bag the cookies will be available soon. If you are a non-baker who wants to help, we would appreciate donations to help offset expense.

We appreciate your understanding and hope our offerings will bring cheer to your holiday.

## Annual Meeting and Dinner

The KVR Friends' Annual Meeting and Dinner will not be held due to the pandemic. As allowed by the bylaws, the Friends' board will elect new board members at its October meeting.

### BOARD CANDIDATES

*The nominees for a three-year term are:*



**Marcia Bader** is retired and lives in rural La Farge. She enjoys hiking in the Reserve and volunteering at KVR events. Marcia has served as treasurer for the Friends

Board for the past three years and is seeking a second term.



**Patty Kinsey** left Milwaukee 34 years ago and her heart has been drawn to the Kickapoo Valley ever since. Being a board member would provide opportunities to be responsible to the land she loves and to give to the community. Patty has experience in marketing, office procedures, fitness and the love to be outdoors.



**Joan Peterson** has been a nature enthusiast since childhood, and fell in love with the Driftless Area in college. In 2011, Joan and her husband Kurt purchased 40 acres of woods, wetlands and to-be-restored prairie outside of La Farge. She has been active with the Friends/KVR by helping at events and with school groups, coordinating the Photo Contest, removing invasive plants, and collecting prairie seed.



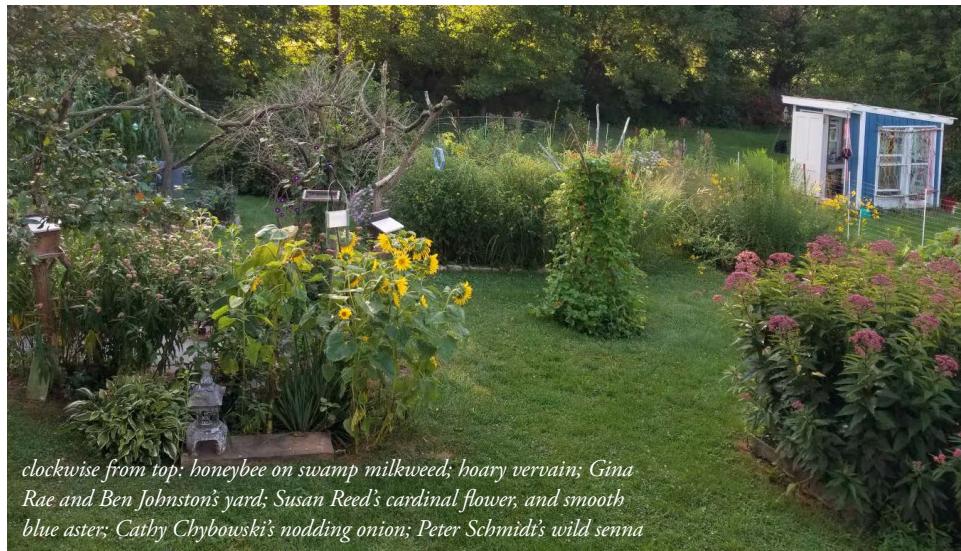
## Less Mowing, More Enjoyment

**Converting lawn to native plants not only reduces time and energy on maintaining an inhospitable patch of earth, it will increase nature awareness as more birds, butterflies and wildflowers visit the yard.**

The process is pretty simple.....remove grass and install wildflowers or vegetable beds. We have been slowly changing our unused mowed space into a “habitarium”, a native plant nursery and vegetable patch. Ironically, as mowing decreases and the beds increase, we are spending more enjoyable time in the yard. Adding structure to the yard through shrubs and bean trellises raises the wildlife potential (*pun!*). Come fall, we collect the native seed to further the lawn reduction program and to support other conservation efforts.

Leaving some seed heads, plant stems, bean stalks, and other “unsightly-ness” provides food and cover for winter. I suppose the yard may seem unkept and chaotic to some folks, but it is not for them we have it that way.

*Ben Johnston is a Citizen Science volunteer*



clockwise from top: honeybee on swamp milkweed; hoary vervain; Gina Rae and Ben Johnston's yard; Susan Reed's cardinal flower; and smooth blue aster; Cathy Chybowski's nodding onion; Peter Schmidt's wild senna



## Friends Donate to Watershed Project

Recognizing the importance of keeping residents and visitors to the Kickapoo Valley safe, the Friends of KVR Board donated \$1,000 to the Kickapoo Valley Association for their work with the Monroe County Climate Change Task Force. Monroe County is spearheading a multi-agency group on a watershed approach to Flood Resilience. High-tech monitors will network with County Emergency Management and the National Weather Service to improve reporting during storm events when flash flooding is most likely to occur.

For more details, visit: [www.co.monroe.wi.us/committees/climate-change-task-force/](http://www.co.monroe.wi.us/committees/climate-change-task-force/)

## Safe and Sound

A plaque honoring KVR Garden founder Bernice Schroeder has a secure home in a boulder on the edge of the gardens. Volunteer gardeners Jean Beck, Louise Muller and Kim Wahl were instrumental in deciding on a holder that would fit into the natural look of the garden, and local stone mason Bronson Miller secured and installed the plaque. It was a fun project, and it's great to know the plaque is safe.



If you are receiving this newsletter by mail, and have email, please consider receiving future newsletters electronically to help reduce production costs. To change, contact the KVR: (608) 625-2960.

## Volunteers in Action!

Volunteers are an integral part of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve. This spring and summer were no exception. Mary-Beth Sarnowski and Tucker Schmitt, two former Limited Term Employees, returned in 2020 as volunteers. Along with them, we were fortunate to have a very small group of dedicated people helping ready the property for one of the busiest summer seasons on record. Interested in volunteering? More details can be found at: <http://kickapoovalley.wi.gov/Get-Involved/Volunteer/>



**Ice Cooler Rescued.** In the historic flood of August 2018, a cooler traveled 5.6 Kickapoo river miles from Ontario to a secluded wooded area. An amazing distance, given the potential for hang-ups, etc. To rescue it, engineering skills, devotion and teamwork paid off!



**River Clean-up.** Scott and Marla Lind coordinated the removal of a submerged canoe; Marla and helper shown above.

Olivia Marron and KVR Executive Director Marcy West remove a large sign.



Tucker Schmitt, a former employee who donated his time to the KVR this summer.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Thank you to all new and renewing members  
(March-August 2020)

Bobbi Barbier  
Jeff Bernardy  
Sara Freedman & Carol Nikolaus  
John Clark  
Rachel Clift  
Julie de la Terre  
Jeff & Jill Dickson  
Robert Dorn  
Keewaydin Farms  
Travis & Amy Forgues  
Deja & Joann Fouts  
Maureen Fox  
Colvin Goree  
Tim Griffin  
Sarah Howe  
Dave & Emily Howell  
Phyllis Hytner  
Brandon Hysel & Jennifer Hammje  
Mark Luebke  
Becky Manning  
Nate & Steph Martin  
Dave McAdow  
Jennifer Mccoy  
Asha & David Myers  
Sarah & Gary Nickelatti  
Dan Reget  
MarilynRinehart  
Margaret Schuh  
Michael Simon  
Maureen Smith  
Scott Sordahl  
Karen Olsen-Ernst & Tom Ernst  
Douglas Ryan & Victoria Swaske  
Kim Wahl  
Cindy Wiar

## 12th Annual Friends Photo Contest Still Open!

The Friends invite you to submit your favorite photos of the KVR in the photo contest. No fancy cameras needed – just go to the Photo Contest page at [www.kickapoofriends.org](http://www.kickapoofriends.org) to upload as many as three digital images.

Entry deadline is October 24, so there is still time to participate. You'll still be able to vote for your favorite photo throughout November, but voting will be done through email due to COVID (stay tuned for voting details). Three photographers who win the most People's Choice votes will each receive a \$50 award.

## The KVR during COVID

No need to tell our Friends members what a strange year it's been – you've lived it. But, worth taking some time to outline what has changed at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve due to COVID.

The Visitor Center has been closed to the public since March. No visitors, school groups, meetings, summer camps or special events. Some staff are working from home, others in the field, with Erica and I taking turns initially and now working from the office with all additional precautions in place.

As other recreation areas have experienced, the property has been incredibly busy. Thanks to getting sale of visitor passes on-line quickly, there has been a 26% increase in Annual Passes alone. Parking and Day use permits will surely show an increase as well. If you ventured out to the River on any of



the many nice Saturdays this summer, you may have witnessed the increase too. Many visitors I talked to had never been here

before, so it took some extra signage, social media posts and answering questions via phone to help them understand how the KVR operates. It is easy to forget that shared-use trail etiquette, first come; first serve campsites and the ability to read a map isn't common to all. One notable improvement is that we didn't provide trash bins at the river access sites. Sure, we heard some complaints but, from a safety perspective of our staff not having to deal with trash, it was a definite improvement.

Financially, the worst is yet to come. Loss of revenue from Education Programming, building use and especially special events like the Dam Challenge Triathlon cancellation are the greatest impact. The next biennium budget required all agencies to show another 5% decrease in expenses. For the most part, the

Reserve operates based on the revenue received. Clearly the health of staff, public and volunteers are a much higher priority than finances. The Kickapoo Reserve Management Board, Friends of KVR and staff will work together to get through it.

New initiatives are already in the works so stay tuned. As the saying goes, we are all in this together. Stay well!

*– KVR Executive Director Marcy West*

[kickapoofriends.org](http://kickapoofriends.org)

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