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Donated Conservation Easement Protects Nearly 800 Miami County Acres

by Laurie Ward

Mission Valley's Fin and Feather Limited Liability Co. has donated a conservation easement on nearly 800 acres in Miami County to the Kansas Land Trust (KLT). The easement protects a place of conservation significance, comprising a variety of landscapes supporting diverse plant and animal populations.

G. Kenneth Baum, a Mission Valley's partner and the person responsible for the donation, noted the potential for wildlife protection on this sizeable, diverse parcel of open land, contiguous to additional open lands.

A native prairie on the property has been documented to have 82 plant species including the endangered Mead's milkweed. Other species indicate the native character of this prairie: big bluestem, lead plant, butterfly milkweed, wild indigos, Illinois bundleflower, purple coneflower, thickspike gayfeather, switch grass, Indian grass, and eastern gama grass. Kelly Kindscher, KLT vice president and plant ecologist, said, "We are most grateful to Kenny Baum and the other Mission Valley's members for choosing to preserve this large, important open space tract. Management practices which Kenny outlined in the easement will give the wildflowers and grasses the best chance of increasing in number over time."

Over 100 acres of native forest contains tall, mature oaks, hickories, sycamores, and many other trees. Two hundred and fifteen forest plant species have been documented including toothwort, sweet William phlox, may apple, Jack-in-the-pulpit, fragile fern, Michigan lily, Solomon's seal, and pawpaw.

Portions of the forest area were once a savanna--a mixture of open forest and prairie. Some species of this mixed ecosystem remain, such as smooth gayfeather and wild hyacinth.

The easement also covers an agricultural area, mostly in hay production and used for cattle-grazing but with 40 acres usually planted in soybeans, corn, or wheat; steep rocky slopes; and a perennial stream named Wea Creek, several intermittent watercourses, and numerous lakes and ponds.

The Mission Valley's land, with a high point of about 1,200' elevation and with its flowing waterways, is home--or stopping-off point--to deer, bobcat, fox, raccoon, coyote, wild turkey, warblers, orioles, tanagers, ducks, pelicans cormorants, and many other wild animals and birds.

Kenneth Baum and the other Mission Valley's Fin and Feather partners--a group of equestrian enthusiasts--purchased the property in 1993 as a place to ride horses and enjoy the natural out-of-doors. Previous owners had operated a camp on the site, and before that, an older club called Fin and Feather had been located there. Kenny developed his personal interest in conservation early in life. His father, George K. Baum, earned a degree in forestry from the University of Wisconsin. After college, George followed a different career path, eventually founding George K. Baum & Company, an investment banking firm, where Kenny was president for many years. But, George never lost his love for the outdoors which he passed on to Kenny.

Kenny can also cite his fifth grade teacher as having influenced his interest in the natural world. "One of those 'outstanding teachers,' among all from grade school through college," she

introduced the flora, fauna, and land characteristics to her students, taking them on Saturday wilderness hikes. Kenny still has a tree identification book given him by this devoted teacher.

Kenny is a founding board member of The Nature Conservancy (TNC)-Kansas Chapter. Familiar with TNC accomplishments in other parts of the country, Kenny was eager to help establish a chapter in Kansas, one of the last states in which the national conservation organization located.

The Kansas Land Trust was established in 1990--one year after TNC-Kansas office opened--and Kenny has been acquainted with KLT representatives from the beginning. After learning about conservation options and KLT's primary interest in holding conservation easements, Kenny contacted KLT to offer the donation of an easement on the Mission Valley's land.

Now that the land has a guaranteed future of remaining in its natural state, Kenny imagines many people learning about and treasuring it. For the present, it remains in private ownership, but the Kansas Land Trust will host occasional events, offering wider enjoyment of the spot.

When asked why he was motivated to grant an easement, Kenny said, "When you look at the land, feel the land, walk on the land, you can understand its value and the benefits of keeping it in a natural condition. It is a great benefit to me, emotionally, and can be of value to those later who can learn to understand it and know, too, how most of the land around here used to be."

Kenny can foresee that not too many years hence, because of encroaching urban sprawl, the array of natural features of this land--still pristine thanks to protection by the conservation easement--will be appreciated and valued as important to preserve. This land's existence will add to the lives of the citizens of metropolitan Kansas City and Miami County, Kenny suggests.

Through the landowner tool of the conservation easement, Kenny chose to prohibit subdivision and commercial activities and other uses of the property inconsistent with his conservation intent. Certain rights--such as agricultural and recreational uses--were retained.

Like all easements held by the Kansas Land Trust, this one was written in perpetuity. The easement deed states that by accepting the easement, KLT will honor the intentions of Kenneth Baum and the Mission Valley's Fin and Feather, preserving and protecting the conservation values of the property for the benefit of "this generation and the generations to come."