

HCA's First Decade Sets Stage for Future Conservation Successes

A beautiful sunset and crisp fall air greeted the reception-goers as they walked along a wooded bluff, which overlooked an increasingly rare spring-fed tributary to Camp Branch Creek in southern Johnson County.

The hike took place as part of an October 2011 gathering that Mike and Connie Chapman hosted at their home, which sits on nearly 40 acres in Stilwell, Kansas.

Guests included Kansas City investment banker G. Kenneth "Kenny" Baum, a nearby landowner, and environmental planner Scott Schulte, who spoke as the president of a newly formed group aiming to protect the Blue River and its vast bistate watershed. Baum was an ardent conservationist, but he was also skeptical. "Son, I think you are biting off more than you can chew," he told Schulte. "Mr. Baum, you are probably right," Schulte replied. "But somebody's got to try." Shortly thereafter, in January 2012, that nascent environmental group incorporated in Missouri as the Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA). One of its main goals was to serve as a unique land trust that preserved urban and exurban open space. As HCA marks its 10-year anniversary, Schulte can laugh now at the exchange with Baum, who died in November 2021 at the age of 91.

"Where we are now has exceeded my wildest expectations," said Schulte, who continues to work as an environmental consultant while also serving on the faculty of the University of Kansas' Environmental Studies program.

Joining Schulte as founding board members were Connie Chapman and Jill Erickson, who went on to become the long-serving executive director of HCA before making a career move to Oregon.

HISTORY

Efforts to harness and manage the Blue River date back decades.

Yet the headwaters of the modern effort to preserve and protect the Blue River – and the entire regional ecosystem – sprung largely from a plan produced by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), when it held its 1991 annual meeting in Kansas City.

The Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) released the MetroGreen Regional Greenway Initiative as a 10-year follow-up to the ASLA blueprint. MetroGreen outlined a 100-year effort to join undeveloped urban and rural corridors in the seven-county region.

MARC and a team of consultants, including Schulte, issued the MetroGreen action plan in 2007 – one of many regional conservation plans and studies produced in the first decade of the new century. Work included identification of preservation priorities within the Upper Blue River Conservation Opportunity Area (COA), which sits at the confluence of the Blue River and Brush Creek in Kansas City. Erickson managed that grant-funded project for Kansas City WildLands, a coalition that is part of the Bridging The Gap, a regional conservation nonprofit. That was an 18-month project in 2008 and 2009.

Erickson's community outreach work included a presentation at the Anita B. Gorman Conservation Discovery Center, a Missouri Department of Conservation facility in Kansas City, Missouri. Connie Chapman and her husband attended the talk, fresh off participating in a citizen's group that had stopped the proposed South Metro Connector road project in southern Johnson County.

All the assessments of the Blue River watershed contributed to Chapman's conviction that the South Metro Connector would have been an ecological disaster. She introduced herself to Erickson after the presentation. Chapman met Schulte through Erickson.

A seminal moment on the road toward establishing the Heartland Conservation Alliance came in 2009, when a developer purchased property in southern Johnson County as Schulte, Erickson, Chapman and other compatriots discussed ways to preserve the land as open space.

"We knew it wasn't just about saving that acreage. It was a bigger issue," Erickson said. "This happens every day (in the region). Land is lost or developed in a way that ruins natural resources."

Erickson said that losing that land catalyzed efforts among a core group of activists to turn MetroGreen and all the other plans and studies into action. The discussions culminated with the outlines of what would become the Heartland Conservation Alliance, an idea that organizers presented to the conservation community at the reception hosted by the Chapmans.



The Heartland Overlook Preserve (HOP). Photo by Regan Tokos.

"We had done a year's worth of work, and meetings, and research, and feasibility and analysis, and we pulled it all together, and we said, 'We think this should be our logo, and our name, and this is what we think we should work on,'" Erickson recalled, "and we got a resounding, 'Hell yes,' and we were off to the races."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Within months of its incorporation, the city of Kansas City included the alliance as a partner in the sustainable reuse plan for its former municipal farm site, a roughly 440-acre parcel located on the bank of the Blue River just east of the Truman Sports Complex. Industrial contamination is just one challenge associated with the site, which once housed the city's tuberculosis hospital and is upstream from the former Anadarko Petroleum site.

Other successes soon followed, with one of the most significant developments coming in 2013, when HCA began its partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and MARC as co-leads in the Blue River Urban Waters Partnership (BRUWP). The partnership includes more than 30 federal, state and local organizations.

BRUWP milestones include:

- Collaborating with the Kansas City water department and community leaders in the city's Marlborough neighborhood on a \$250,000 project that helped integrate 38 vacant lots into a "green infrastructure" initiative.
- Receiving \$500,000 in groundwater restoration funds to advance an initiative of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to protect and restore 18 acres of wetland habitat at the municipal farm.
- Producing graduates through the Green Stewardship Training program, including 31 students from East High School in 2019, who attended a dozen classes over three months and spent two workdays at various locations.

Outside of the urban waters partnership, HCA in 2021 used a grant from the Missouri Department of Conservation to pilot the idea of a "green careers corps." One of the goals for the corps was connecting residents from underrepresented groups to nature while exposing them to careers in conservation. The pilot led to the establishment of HCA's Nature Action Crew supported by a full-time paid position. Funding from an EPA workforce and job training program allowed HCA to partner this year with another area nonprofit to provide a 10-week conservation and landscaping apprentice program for foster children ages 18 to 24.

TALL ORDER

All that being said, one of the biggest lessons for the founders of HCA is just how hard it is to actually acquire land through the trust. It's not easy to convince landowners to forego development rights on part of their property for conservation purposes.

HCA will protect approximately 30 acres at the municipal farm site through a conservation easement with the city. But it was not until 2021 that HCA completed a two-year campaign to purchase its first piece of property: 40 acres of oak and hickory forest along the Blue River that was surplus by Jackson County. The property, just north of the intersection of Bannister Road and Blue River Parkway, is known as the HOP. HCA purchased the property for \$152,000 with a loan from The Conservation Fund – partially offset with an \$83,000 matching grant from the Missouri Department of Conservation – and successfully completed a \$250,000 fundraising campaign to finance debt service and maintenance.

Persistence in the face of doubt is a hallmark of HCA's multi-faceted success. Skeptics told the founders that it was infeasible to establish a land trust that focused both on urban parcels and suburban/exurban tracts that also surrounded threatened waterways. "We politely declined to listen to that advice," Schulte said, "and said, 'No, we'll just figure out how to work on vacant lots in the urban core ... and work with conservation of more pristine landscapes in rural areas.'"

THE FUTURE

It is vital that HCA continue its work, Chapman said, in the face of inexorable and irreversible development. "If we don't preserve what is left of the land – at least a large percentage of it – we are going to be nothing but concrete – and lawns," she said. Schulte laid out an ambitious plan for HCA's next decade – including replanting hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of flood-plain forests with carbon-dioxide sequestering trees. Erickson, too, envisioned "conservation on a landscape scale" that goes beyond individual successes like the HOP or the municipal farm to creating a vibrant, interconnected corridor. "That's the scale that needs to happen next – and they are getting there."



The Heartland Conservation Alliance wants to build upon this abbreviated history of the organization. Our plan is to tell more detailed stories about the 10 biggest accomplishments of our first decade. The alliance is seeking funding for that effort through grants and donations. If you are interested in making a contribution, or have ideas on other potential funding sources, please contact HCA Executive Director Logan Heley at logan@heartlandconservationalliance.org