

A graduate of the Valley Forge class of 1966, Jim Wohl described himself as one of the shyest kids there. Always interested in plants and animals, he considered a career as a forest ranger. But that was not the path his life was to take.

He received an associate degree in culinary arts from Oklahoma State University and an associate degree in electronics from the Electronics Technology Institute of Cleveland.

Jim has spent the last 30 years perfecting his organic gardening skills in his back yard garden in Parma Heights. He became a certified Backyard Steward for the National Wildlife Federation. As a volunteer for the Cleveland Metro Parks, he used the skills he developed pursuing his hobby as an amateur videographer to capture the sights and sounds of our beautiful park system on DVDs that can be enjoyed at the nature centers within the parks.

After Jim's unsuccessful run for a seat on the Parma Heights city council, Bill Litten, Parma Heights director of Recreation, suggested he could still make a positive difference in the community by becoming involved with Valley Forge High School. While working on the 40th reunion of his graduating class, he became reacquainted with the school and had the chance to speak with the principal, Steele Nowlin, and some of the teachers. Talk eventually settled around the inner court yard and the family of ducks that had taken up residence there. Biology teacher Jon Komar mentioned that the idea of building a wetland had been discussed off-and-on for the past ten years. With Principal Nowlin's blessing, Jim's contacts with the National Wildlife Federation and the Cleveland Metro Parks finally put the wheels in motion for the wetland project.

Terry Greathouse, professor of biology at the Tri-C Western Campus and wetland consultant for the Cleveland Metro Parks, came on board to lend his expertise to the project. After eight months of planning and meeting with the superintendent of Parma Schools, school board members, Mark Link of the Cuyahoga County Health Department, and members of the county sewer district, the wetland project was on its way. The kick-off date, May 12, 2007, drew an assembly of 125 volunteers including Ohio State Senator, Dale Miller and State Representative, Tim DeGeeter.

The Valley Forge students were involved in all aspects of the project from planning to digging. They, along with their teachers and students from Tri-C, braved the stifling heat and blazing sun to supply most of the muscle needed to dig out, by hand, over 30 truckloads of dirt that had to be wheelbarrowed out of the courtyard, through the school halls, and dumped in front of the school. The City of Parma Heights provided for the disposal of the unneeded soil.

Because of the dry summer, city water was used to fill the wetland. Now natural precipitation is sufficient to supply the needed water.

Seedlings from the Tri-C greenhouse, thinned-out plants from the West Creek Reservoir, a gift from the Oatey Company and private donations filled the wetland with the native vegetation needed to support the dragonflies, damsel flies and other creatures that are already calling the wetland "home".

The wetland at Valley Forge is a shining example of what can be accomplished when the people of the community work together. With many hours of "sweat-equity" a living classroom was created with no cost to the school. Generations of students will have the opportunity to become connected with the natural world around them thanks to all who helped make this project a reality.

In the years to come, Jim plans to continue helping the students of the Valley Forge Ecology Club take care of their wetland. He is also speaking with another school in the district about the possibility of constructing a natural site on their property.