

THE PEOPLE OF STARKWEATHER CREEK

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ELIZABETH ARTH: NATURAL PLACE FOR FAMILY

Five-year-old Henry McAlvanah hops on his bicycle and takes off down a winding path through O.B. Sherry Park, with his little sister, Opal, and their mom, Elizabeth Arth, trailing behind him.

Within minutes of leaving their Leon Street home, just across from the park, Henry and Opal, 3, are on the bank of one of the most picturesque stretches of Starkweather Creek, where they take turns swinging on the braided branches of a weeping willow and "fish" with branches tied with "bobbers" their mom makes out of leaves.

"We feel like we're in such a special nook of green space," Arth said. "I feel like my kids get this really unique experience of nature — like wild living in the middle of the city."

In addition to their proximity to O.B. Sherry Park, where the two branches of Starkweather Creek converge in wetlands, Arth and her family are just a few houses away from the stretch of Milwaukee Street that includes the Voit farm and the former Bletner property, which the city of Madison has acquired for a Starkweather Marsh Conservation Park.

When Arth and husband Dan McAlvanah first looked at the 718-square-foot house they bought just before Opal was born, they didn't know about the creek. "We weren't sure we could be a family of four in this house," Arth said. But when they discovered the creek while walking through the park, she said, "We were like, 'Holy cow — I think we could live there.'"

Along with the opportunity to experience and teach her children about nature, Starkweather has enriched her life in other ways, Arth said. "It's connected me to a community of people."

Arth learned about Friends of Starkweather Creek from a flier on a Glass Nickel Pizza box. Now a board member, she does the group's newsletter, The Trickle, and helps organize its summer and winter solstice celebrations in Olbrich Park, where the creek empties into Lake Monona.

The summer solstice is the height of celebrating both the creek and the community it has created, Arth said. "The winter solstice is very much about celebrating the longest night of the year and the return of light and the connection we have with the creek," she said. "For me, it's knowing the long days playing along the creek and canoeing are not far away."



CRAIG SCHREINER — State Journal

Jane Rowe has planted rain gardens to keep runoff from polluting Starkweather Creek, which runs behind her James Street home.

JANE ROWE: 'WE GET SO MUCH FOR THE MONEY'

Jane Rowe wouldn't trade her creek-side home with its yard full of creeping charlie for the manicured lawns of houses along lakes Monona and Mendota.

"I don't just love the creek, I love the neighborhood," Rowe said. "I just love our sheer motleyness."

A retired librarian for the Madison School District, Rowe, 74, finds the diverse human habitat along Starkweather Creek as appealing as the array of wildlife it harbors.

People from all walks of life and income levels — from graduate students living in an apartment building across the street to a homeless person who once set up camp nearby — dwell with the variety of birds, frogs and turtles that share the secluded stretch of the creek's west bank.

Here, where the steady stream of Milwaukee Street traffic fades into a forest-

like thicket graced by a majestic cottonwood tree, Rowe and her partner, Carol Berglund, 57, dwell in something akin to a fishbowl — a spacious sunroom that puts them smack in the midst of the urban waterway's tree-lined banks and neighboring wetlands that are home to sandhill cranes and great blue herons.

"We feel like we're right in nature, not just looking at it," said Rowe, who bought her modest home at the end of James Street 17 years ago, with thoughts of adding the sunroom.

"We just live out here," Rowe said. "This is part of the fun. Sometimes we have kayakers and canoeists come down."

Across the creek, on land owned by the city, river birches flash their luminous red bark. "They are just marvelous in the morning sunlight," Rowe said. "I don't even resent property taxes because we feel we get so much for the money."

Rowe and Berglund, who is on the board of Friends of Starkweather Creek, have planted rain gardens of prairie cone flowers, joe-pye weed, grasses, sedges and other native plants both in their front- and backyards to help prevent polluted runoff from going into the creek.

Friends of Starkweather Creek also is planning to create a rain garden between the Madison-Kipp plant and adjacent marshland.

Rowe was drawn to Starkweather by her childhood memories of summers spent at her grandparents in the Dodgeville area, part of the unglaciated region with "hills and valleys and lots of creeks," where she recalls "getting nipped on the toes by crawdaddies."

"We swam in the creeks and we swung through them from the willow trees," she said. "My fondest memories are of that creek country. Even though this isn't the same kind of creek, it feels like home."

SHARI DAVIS AND BILL BECKMAN: MUSICIANS WITH SONGBIRD REFUGE

The roar of traffic racing past the Milwaukee Street home of Shari Davis and Bill Beckman is muted by the refuge of the backyard sanctuary they have created along Starkweather Creek.

"I don't even notice it anymore," said Davis, lead singer in the local blues group Shari Davis and the Hootchy-Kootchy Band, who moved into the house at Milwaukee Street and Clyde Gallagher Avenue 22 years ago.

Beckman, a carpenter with Classic Construction who plays bass in the Hootchy-Kootchy Band, joined her a couple years later, fixed up the house and transformed their yard into a natural habitat they share with ducks, birds and other wildlife along the urban waterway.

"I came out one day and there was a sandhill crane standing right by my truck," said Beckman, 55, who found a turkey under his bird feeder last Easter. "A couple times there's been beaver in the creek."

In contrast to busy Milwaukee Street, traffic along nar-



JOHN MANIACI — State Journal

Shari Davis and Bill Beckman enjoy the natural oasis they have created in their yard along Clyde Gallagher Avenue, at the corner of Milwaukee Street and Starkweather Creek.

row Clyde Gallagher consists mainly of neighborhood residents who know to slow down for ducks crossing from the creek to the yard Beckman

has planted with trees and flowering plants in the hope of attracting hummingbirds.

"I get lots of birds," said Beckman, who has had a mi-

grating scarlet tanager and a rose-breasted grosbeak, along with lots of woodpeckers, visit feeders hung amid his lilies, bee balm, Chinese lantern

and cupplants — prairie wildflowers whose leaves form tiny basins at the plant stem that hold water "like little bird baths," Davis said.

"My passion flowers are my favorite," Beckman said of the spindly blooms that "look like little space alien ballerinas" to Davis, who fancies a young weeping pine.

"I love to come out here and do nothing," said Davis, 58, who has her own cleaning business.

"It has sort of the feeling of being in the country, being next to the creek," she said. "It's important to keep the connection with nature. It's part of who we are."

"I'm outside all the time," said Beckman. "It's great. Everybody walks past here, rides their bikes past here. Everybody says 'hi.' We don't know a lot of names, but everyone is friendly."

Beckman and Davis, along with several other property owners along Clyde Gallagher, will be losing several feet of yard that is owned by the city, which plans to widen the street and install sidewalks in conjunction with a new bike path.

OPEN TO MORE: PATHS PROPOSED FOR CREEK'S FUTURE



JOHN MANIACI — State Journal

The metal sheeting lining the banks of Starkweather Creek along Clyde Gallagher Avenue near Hermlna Street is scheduled to be removed next year.

Dan Smith bikes to work along Starkweather Creek from his home on Sherman Avenue to Borders Bookstore at East Towne Mall, passing by turkeys, snapping turtles and lots of deer.

"You will go along and the deer will break across in front of you — you have to look out," Smith said.

"It's one of the best bird-watching spots in Dane County," he added. "The migratories in the spring are the ones that really give me a fever."

Friends of Starkweather Creek has been working with the city of Madison on a master plan to improve and preserve Starkweather Creek and its watershed, which encompasses much of the city.

Previous efforts to improve Starkweather — including straightening and dredging the creek, and installing metal sheeting to shore up its banks on stretches along either

side of Milwaukee Street — still draw criticism from some residents.

The metal sheeting — which makes it difficult to get into or out of the creek — was cited as a factor in the death of a 2-year-old Milwaukee girl who died after falling into the creek along Clyde Gallagher Avenue in 2000.

Tony Fernandez, a city transportation engineer, is working on plans for a bike path that will run along Clyde Gallagher, where the steel sheeting will be removed and replaced with more natural landscaping beginning next year.

The new path will connect with the existing Starkweather Creek Bike Path, with bridges over East Washington and Aberg avenues. It will continue through Dixon Greenway, a city park on Milwaukee Street, and link to the Isthmus Bike Path, which runs along Atwood Community Gardens.

The city also is nearing completion of a new Marsh View Bike Path, which runs under Highway 30 and over Starkweather Creek to Mayfair Avenue.

Smith hopes these and other efforts will help more people to appreciate the value of the waterway in the midst of its urban landscape.

"I think Starkweather Creek is one of our gems here in the city of Madison," said Ald. Santiago Rosas, whose backyard borders the west branch of the creek.

Residents of Rosas' Westchester Gardens neighborhood off Highway 51, across from the Dane County Airport, were concerned when Friends of Starkweather Creek proposed a walking path there. But Rosas, who hopes to continue to explore possibilities, said residents have come to understand "it's something to be enjoyed by everyone, not just the people living here."