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PELIZZARI NATURAL AREA

By any measure, the Pelizzari Natural Area isn’t the largest land protection project GTRLC has been involved with. It’s not even in the top 25. And while it’s a diverse and scenic piece of land, it lacks many of the glamorous conservation elements of other GTRLC projects.

But of all the land protected by GTRLC, you’d be hard pressed to find a place more thoroughly treasured by the scores of people who use it. For so many people, this relatively small strip near the base of the Old Mission Peninsula provides that peaceful spot to unwind at the end of a long work day, or to stretch the legs for a few hours of the day in any season.

Its location off Center Road puts it right along the path home for many Peninsula residents, but it’s also only a stone’s throw from the Traverse City line. Combine this with the fact that it offers something for everyone, and the parking lot is almost never empty.

“It’s been such a tremendous asset to the parks system in Peninsula Township,” former township supervisor Rob Manigold said. “It’s constantly being used, and people are very happy that we proceeded with it.”

What is now enjoyed by many was the brainchild of one man who fought for years to have the park established, and with the help of GTRLC finally saw the vision become reality.

“Dave Murphy is the spark plug that got everything going and kept it moving,” Manigold said. “He’s the guy.”

The story begins in 1995, when Murphy asked for permission to hike on land under the care of his neighbors, Gene and Maxine Pelizzari. The Pelizzaris had already sold off the old fruit farm established by Gene’s father Armando in the 1920s, but still looked after a small chunk they sold to their son. Murphy soon made contact with the owners of the remainder of the old farm and gained their permission to hike as well.

Murphy quickly became enchanted by the property. He was struck by its beauty, and couldn’t believe how quiet and peaceful it was for being so close to town.

“Despite the fact that portions were old orchards, there were some really cool spots that had never been touched,” he said. “Walking around those old hemlocks is just amazing. There are some...that are bigger than those out at the dunes, and that’s just phenomenal.”



PHOTOS BY MARY VANVALIN





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And the place was loaded with wildlife.

“There was a day I was walking around up there on a windy day, so I sort of had my head down, and all of a sudden this huge shadow appears. I look up, and five feet away from me is this beautiful bald eagle lifting off a hillside,” he said. “Every time I ran into Gene there was a new story about one animal or another.”

The bulk of the property had been sold in 1991 to a family that had purchased it and several other parcels on speculation, Murphy said, so he became very concerned about the potential for a housing development on the site. So began Murphy’s years-long process to try to turn the land into a park.

To make a long story short, due to a variety of other distractions and a lack of receptive township officials, the idea went nowhere. Despite dozens of meetings, surveys and other bureaucratic goings-on, the township appeared to lack the money – or the will – to buy the land.

“We could make the point that there were thousands of potential users within a five-minute walk, bike ride or drive,” he said. “This was nearby nature.”

“There were so many reasons why the answer was no,” Murphy said.

Fortunately, during this period, the property also avoided sale to a developer. A weary Murphy was re-energized in 2007 by the involvement of Mary VanValin, Jeff Graft, Grant Parsons, Mary Beth Milliken and other concerned citizens who took up the cause.

Murphy had on-and-off conversations with GTRLC throughout the process, but the property didn’t appear ideal for either a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant or direct acquisition by the

conservancy. But Chown and Manigold eventually cooked up the idea of putting the issue up for a vote and letting township residents decide if the land was worth saving.

In mid-2008, the township board agreed put a millage on that year’s November election. Voters could then decide if township residents would fund the roughly \$2 million purchase price. Meanwhile, GTRLC negotiated with the landowners to secure a purchase option to hold the land and wait for the election.

Glen Chown, Mary VanValin and Dave Murphy stand near a sign after the millage election. The park was later renamed the Pelizzari Natural Area.



"That was my victory," Murphy said of the township board's decision.

Murphy and others took to the streets in an effort to lobby for millage approval. GTRLC and the township – as a unit of government and a nonprofit, respectively – were both legally barred from advocating for the millage, so Murphy's citizens' group bore the brunt of the efforts. But Chown and Murphy also partnered for a series of very well-attended educational hikes on the land in the lead-up to the election, something that likely energized the voter base.

"We got hundreds of people out on the property," Chown said. "And we were lucky that we had a stretch of gorgeous weather."

Murphy worked hard to impress upon people the potential traffic issues if yet another subdivision was built in the congested southern half of the township. He also stressed the value of a beautiful natural area so close to so many people.

"We could make the point that there were thousands of potential users within a five-minute walk, bike ride or drive," he said. "This was nearby nature."

The millage passed by a comfortable margin, and the land was eventually transferred to the township in 2009. What was initially called the Center Road Natural Area was eventually renamed the Pelizzari Natural Area in honor of the original owners.

Murphy has since been thrilled to interact with residents from the Peninsula, Traverse City and beyond who marvel

at the beauty of the Pelizzari Natural Area. After his years of involvement in making the park a reality, those types of chats are music to Murphy's ears.

"I've had that conversation 100 times, and that's validation," he said. "It's getting use – it's getting a ton of use."



PHOTO BY MARY VANVALIN

Murphy said he can't say enough about GTRLC's involvement and support of the project.

"This park would absolutely not exist without the conservancy's help," he said. "I've been the conservancy's biggest champion every chance I get."

In turn,

Chown is grateful that Murphy never gave up on his dream of seeing a park on the old Pelizzari land.

"He poured his heart and soul – and then some – into this project. He was the community leader, there's no doubt about it," Chown said. "He went way above and beyond the call of duty."

"It's been such a tremendous asset to the parks system in Peninsula Township," former township supervisor Rob Manigold said. "It's constantly being used, and people are very happy that we proceeded with it."

Gene and Maxine Pelizzari both died in recent years. Their son John, who still owns land adjacent to the park, said they were overjoyed to know their land, such a part of their family

for so many years, would be enjoyed for generations to come.

"They were incredibly pleased to know that the property was always going to be open and that people would be able to enjoy it," John Pelizzari said. "They were pretty quiet people, but I know they were awfully proud of the fact that property stayed open and wasn't developed."



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