



# THE LEVIN LEGACY

LIVING LABORATORY INSPIRES FUTURE GENERATIONS OF BIOLOGY STUDENTS

BY KATHARINE CASSENS



Frank and Jeanette Levin have made a lasting difference in many areas and industries. To this day, they are still protecting the environment and changing lives with their altruism, yet they are still humble in talking about the impact they have made.

In the 1970s, Frank and Jeanette, now 93 and 90, respectively, conducted market research in the Western New York area through their business, Buffalo Survey & Research, Inc. “Market research was really a foreign concept back then,” says Jeanette Levin. People had a little knowledge about it from their studies, but nothing that made headlines.”

The husband and wife, nationally trained in conducting surveys and polls, were commissioned by a New York City firm and the then *Buffalo Evening News* to conduct election polls. Frank and Jeanette educated their staff in non-biased, ethical interviewing, and their work helped dignify the field of market research, both locally and beyond. As Buffalo Survey’s reputation continued to grow, the team earned commissions to conduct market research and focus groups for national companies.

When Frank and Jeanette’s son, David Levin, took over the operations of Buffalo Survey in the late 1990s, the couple shifted their focus to another venture — real estate. “There is a saying that you go to the edge of town and buy the closest land that has not been used yet,” says Frank Levin. “I was always interested in investing in land for future use.”

So, approximately 25 years ago, the Levins invested in 40 acres of farmland off of French Road in Amherst. They sold half of the land in the mid-1990s to the home builders who constructed what is now Daven Drive. It was during the development of that project that approximately 10 acres of wetlands were discovered on the property.

The area was officially designated as wetlands by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1996. Wetlands, according to the DEC, are areas saturated by surface or ground water that are sufficient to support distinctive vegetation and serve as a native habitat for many species. Guidelines from the DEC aim to preserve wetlands in their natural state. With this designation, the Levins’ land was never, and may never, be developed.

Fittingly, the Levins have long been interested in environmental conservation. In 1993, they donated significant funding to preserve Strawberry Island, part of the Niagara River near Grand Island. The couple’s contribution allowed the land to be stabilized, thus preventing further erosion, changes to the current or damages to the river’s ecosystem.

Given the Levins’ interest in preservation, they wanted to keep the wetlands on their property in a forever-green state. “We want to see that the water is preserved,” says Frank Levin. “We want to see that the trees and wildlife are maintained, and not just for a season or two, but forever.”

Enter Bernadette Clabeaux, Ph.D., '05, assistant professor of biology at Medaille College. Dr. Clabeaux is active in environmental and wildlife conservation, and in 2015, she was featured in a “2 The Outdoors” news segment on WGRZ meant to highlight the importance of wetlands.

“Wetlands are nurseries for fish and amphibians,” said Dr. Clabeaux. “They are essentially the kidneys of the Earth, and the vegetation filters water, taking out toxins and contaminants. The biodiversity sustains a number of different species, and when you witness the diversity of life that exists, it changes your entire view of the land. It makes it all so special.”

When the story with Dr. Clabeaux aired on WGRZ, Robert Strell, real estate agent and longtime friend to the Levins, was watching the news. “In the short time that Dr. Clabeaux was on the air, she gave such an articulate talk about wetlands,” says Strell. “Meanwhile, I had just discussed the Daven Drive property with Frank and Jeanette, and what the donation possibilities were with local organizations or colleges.”

Shortly thereafter, Strell contacted Dr. Clabeaux to learn more about Medaille and its biology program. And the rest, as Frank Levin says, is history. The Levins and Dr. Clabeaux fostered a quick kinship over shared ideologies, and they talked about how the property would fit into the College’s programming. They worked together for more than two years to satisfy the necessary legal and environmental regulations related to the land donation.

The Levins wanted the 10-acre wetland property, located at 3725 Millersport Highway, to be utilized in a meaningful way. By donating the land to Medaille, the couple is assured that it will be put to good use by biology students who can use the land as a “living laboratory” to study ecology. The property, which the College has appropriately named “The Frank and Jeanette Levin Living Laboratory,” will allow students to study the ecosystem and various factors that affect the flora and fauna on site.

Given the earth’s fluctuating climate in today’s day and age, environmental education is extremely important for everyone, especially aspiring biologists. Medaille College President Kenneth Macur, Ph.D., understands this significance. “The generosity of Frank and

PHOTO BY NANCY J. PARISI



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## EXPLORATION AND OBSERVATION

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Jeanette Levin will go a long way in providing our students with firsthand experience in learning about the environment,” he says. “Exploration and observation are key components of the educational experience, and the donation of this property has presented the opportunity to learn about impactful issues beyond the traditional classroom.”

In October 2019, Medaille officials were joined by the Levins, students and faculty to take official possession of the property in an intimate ceremony. At the ceremony, Frank Levin expressed the couple’s intentions in giving the land to Medaille. “My wife and I believe we have an obligation to help make a better world through the education of our youth and through protecting the environment,” he said. “Happily, this donation allows us to do both.”

According to Dr. Clabeaux, the Levins are indeed passing down their passion for conservation. “I believe the legacy of the land donation is beginning, as we already have a number of students using the site for investigations or independent study research projects,” she says.

Some biology majors are using the wetlands to investigate the impacts of invasive species on forest dynamics. Sophomore Jay Bortel, who has focused his research on the ecological importance of the great blue heron species, plans to keep revisiting the site to continue to study the birds and their behavioral patterns.

“It is really cool to see wildlife thrive without really much human interaction,” says Bortel. “And there are vernal ponds (a kind of temporary wetland) there, which is rare. It is awesome to see stuff like that in the wild, with your own eyes, versus reading it out of a textbook.”

The intent is that students can now practice what they have learned in the classroom, and that such application will help prepare them for biology-based careers in fields like research, medicine or ecology. The Levins’ donation also provides the opportunity for Medaille to get more involved in the community by promoting environmental awareness. Moving forward, Dr. Clabeaux hopes to create community workshops or forums where students can educate others on the importance of land preservation.

Since meeting Dr. Clabeaux, Frank and Jeanette have attended several student capstone



presentations at Medaille. They find it gratifying to hear students discuss environmental issues, and when Frank Levin is asked to share his advice with younger generations, he goes back to the basics. “Do the right thing, be sensitive to people and have integrity,” he says.

Thanks to the Levins, biology students at Medaille will continue to use the wetlands in Amherst to conduct research and collect data, both for coursework and independent studies. Not only does the land provide unique, in-depth learning experiences, but it also helps carry on the mission and passion of Frank and Jeanette Levin.

“All the right things came together at the same time,” says Strell. “It is such a beautiful match. Students will be out there inventorying species and doing their work, and it will be a wonderful way to remember the Levins.”

PHOTOS BY GAVINITY MCGHEE AND DR. BERNADETTE CLAREBAUX



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