

NATURE

Annual cleanup slated for Bonsal Wildlife Preserve

By MARK S. PORTER
of *The Montclair Times*

Eight years ago, Deborah DeSalvo helped organize the first community cleanup of the Alonzo F. Bonsal Wildlife Preserve. The cleanup coincided with the birth of her daughter, Julia.

"We kind of gave birth to this [cleanup] at the same time we gave birth to her," said DeSalvo, who urges citizens to participate in the upcoming eighth annual cleanup of the Bonsal Wildlife Preserve on Saturday, March 31.

Participants are encouraged to meet at 10 a.m. at the Riverview Drive entrance to the preserve, located off Alexander Avenue and east of Grove Street in the northeast corner of Montclair.

Conducted under the auspices of the Friends of the Bonsal Preserve, neighborhood organizers will supply gloves, waders and trash bags that are donated every year by the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission. "They are an amazing resource. They have always provided us with plenty of bags and waders and manpower," DeSalvo said of the commission.

The cleanup will continue to around 3 p.m. Volunteers can arrive throughout the five-hour cleanup.

The Bonsal Preserve is among the last remaining undeveloped tracts in Montclair.

The Third River flows through the 17-acre municipal park, and a small bridge extends across the waterway. It's also known as Pearl Brook, named after freshwater pearls found in the stream, which is a tributary of the Passaic River. Fact or lore claims that the largest freshwater pearl ever found in the United States was discovered in the Pearl Brook, noted resident Jonathan Grupper.

The Bonsal family of Montclair contributed money to purchase a portion of the large tract of undeveloped land that was donated to Montclair Township. In return, the

tract was named in memory of longtime Montclair resident Alonzo Bonsal.

Some neighbors and nature lovers have struggled to protect the preserve from what they perceive as unnecessary development, objecting to a plan by Clifton to replace a sizable sanitary-sewer line that traverses the tract. Clifton maintains that redirecting the sewer line outside of the Bonsal tract is cost-prohibitive, and intends to remove trees and install a 20-foot-wide gravel road parallel to the sewer line.

According to Grupper, who is one of the cleanup organizers, several Bonsal Preserve supporters recently "met with the Clifton Environmental Commission, which possesses only advisory powers. We were able to persuade them that, instead, the path be temporary, and that Clifton should reforest it after the work is done."

In an e-mail, Grupper indicated that "there is still a chance that an alternate plan involving re-routing the line via Chittenden Road has not been thoroughly assessed. But that sounds remote at present."

Grupper stated that the Friends of the Bonsal Preserve may mount "a concerted campaign" to minimize the construction work slated by Clifton in the Montclair preserve, including the possible scheduling of a Montclair Town Meeting on Monday, March 26, at 7 p.m.

Grupper this week told *The Times* that a gravel roadway "would be too intrusive. There's got to be another way."

"It doesn't really need to be a conflict. Nobody wants a broken sewer line running through a beautiful woods," Grupper said. "We're more optimistic. We're finally breaking through to the people making decisions. We're eager for them to include us in."

"We would definitely love the sewer line to not be there, but that's not going to happen," said DeSalvo, who noted that Clifton

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has spent years discussing major reconstruction work on its sewer line that extends across the Preserve. "The timeline on the potential work of the sewer line is so unclear."

The Bonsal Preserve includes a variety of forested areas, including trees that would be destroyed if a vehicular pathway for Clifton sewerage-maintenance vehicles was widened.

Grupper noted that the Preserve teems with wildlife.

"There is a pair of great horned owls nesting in the south end. This is an enormous bird. There are two of them, and they need to nest in a large tree," he said. "This is a small woods, but we've seen a red-tailed hawk and a red fox."

Every annual cleanup day, as volunteers collected debris and litter from the Preserve's forest, fields and stream basin, Dick Bonsal would visit the locale. In the years before Montclair created a township council in 1980 to legislate local governmental functions, Bonsal had been a longstanding township commissioner, and he was active in many local organizations. During the past half-decade,

the Montclair resident who was the son of Alonzo grew increasingly debilitated, but he always attended the Bonsal Preserve cleanup.

Last year, Dick Bonsal died.

"This is the first year we'll be doing the cleanup since Mr. Bonsal passed away," DeSalvo said. "It's sad that he won't be there to cheer us on."

"He enjoyed seeing the Preserve carry on. His absence is definitely going to be felt," Grupper noted.

Grupper said of the cleanup day: "It's not all hard work. It's a lot of fun. You get to feel like explorers."

"It's this little corner of Montclair, one of the few areas of Montclair that's not manicured," said Grupper. "It's the day of the year I really feel connected to this town."

The rain date for the annual Bonsal Preserve cleanup is Sunday, April 1.

For more information, call Jonathan Grupper, 973-233-1744, or Deborah DeSalvo, 973-746-0242.