



TIME WELL SPENT

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I believe the great singer/songwriter, Jim Croce, was speaking from experience when he penned the line, “there never seems to be enough time to do the things you want to do, once you find them.” How one spends his or her time matters. It is indicative of our priorities. Had I not felt being outdoors was time well spent, I would likely not have opted for a career in natural resources. My vocation has worked well in that it has afforded me the opportunity to work with many landowners who wanted to manage their property well. One such is the Neighbors family, owners of Rolling Mountain Plantation, the 2015 Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award winner for Central Alabama.

One of the best rewards I receive from working with landowners is to have them put my recommendations into practice and yield the desired benefits. Landowners who actively manage their property understand the dedication necessary to make their property all it can be. In many ways, the Neighbors family is no exception. However, they are different in a very special way.

Early in my career I was approached by the Coosa County Extension agent and asked if I would serve as an assistant coach for the county 4-H wildlife judging team. He explained how the program not only introduced youth to the principles and practices of wildlife management, but also strengthened their life skills by enhancing their ability to study and write.

Quickly realizing the program had merit, I volunteered to assist. At the time, I didn't realize I was starting on a 20-year journey. I joined with several members of the Coosa County Forestry Planning Committee (CCFPC) who embraced the program, working hard to instill in the students both a land ethic and the essentials of proper stewardship. Since the majority of kids involved were members of both the wildlife and forestry teams, they got a hefty double dose of instruction.

In my first group of students were a brother and sister named Phillip and Heather Neighbors. These were exceptional students whose hard work and dedication allowed them to compete all the way to the national contests in both wildlife and forestry.

Following graduation, neither Phillip nor Heather pursued a career in natural resources; however, their 4-H training served them well. Both attended Auburn University, where Phillip received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and Heather received a Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations. She later earned a Master of Science degree in Communications from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Today, Heather serves as the Director of Audience Development for Time, Inc.

After being employed with a private engineering firm in Montgomery for 10 years, Phillip returned to his roots to work as an engineer for Coosa County. Although he had already been making improvements on the family property, it was at this point that Phillip met with AFC County Forester Blake Kelley and me to discuss the family's objectives and develop a forest management plan. As was our custom, we also explained the TREASURE Forest program and what it would take to have the property certified. We discussed the need for a diverse habitat, and how stands of various ages and composition were wise choices that would help meet their objectives.

Phillip relayed our recommendations to the family and the decision was made to clear-cut a stagnant loblolly plantation, apply for cost assistance for reforestation with longleaf, and create additional wildlife openings. The application was approved, and forest management began in earnest. Although the property had not been intensely managed in the past, Phillip knew it could produce improved wildlife habitat, enhanced recreation opportunities, and increased timber production.

The initial plan included enhancing wildlife habitat and increasing harvest opportunities by creating 10 acres of wildlife openings and planting them in winter forages. (This was a major emphasis for Phillip, an avid deer and turkey hunter). Site preparing and planting both longleaf and loblolly would provide much needed early successional habitat which was lacking on the property.

During 2007-08, the family site-prepped and planted 80.5 acres of longleaf and 11.2 acres of loblolly. Another 8.2 acres of young loblolly was pre-commercially thinned by hand.

Taking advantage of the clear-cut and loading areas, 12.9 acres of wildlife openings were created. Prescribed burns were conducted on 153.9 acres to reduce hazardous fuels and improve wildlife habitat.

While Phillip was busy working on the timber and wildlife aspects of the property, his mom, Sandra, undertook the recreational aspect by restoring the old home place. The centerpiece of this home place is the homestead that was built in 1843. Sandra diligently restored the home, furnishing it with authentic pieces from days gone by. Providing opportunities for youth and adults to step back in time and see how things were done many years ago, the old home place has been visited numerous times by various groups including school children and historical societies.

Based on the Neighbors' accomplishments toward their objectives, the Rolling Mountain Plantation was certified as a TREASURE Forest in 2008. This achievement was awarded to the family at the 2009 Coosa County Landowners Tour. Following that presentation, the family received certification from the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries as a "Century and Heritage Farm." This signified that the property had been owned by the same family for at least 100 years, reflecting interesting historical and important agricultural qualities. The family's property management was hitting full stride.

Using our recommendations and their personal knowledge, they began an aggressive thinning program to improve the quality of the stands and provide more browse for wildlife. Multiple tracts on the property were set up on a rotating prescribed burn schedule and more wildlife openings were created.

With the timber and wildlife management taking shape, the CCFPC approached the Neighbors with the idea of a landowner tour on their property. The family was receptive and hosted an informative tour with stations including hog trapping, longleaf planting, and thinning of pine plantations. Phillip addressed the group concerning the family's quest toward TREASURE Forest certification and how it had resulted in a well-managed property that was meeting their objectives.

(Continued on page 6)





TIME WELL SPENT

(Continued from page 5)

A year or two later the committee again approached the family with an opportunity to host the annual CCFPC “adopt-a-school” program. Obviously understanding the benefit of introducing youngsters to the outdoors, the Neighbors agreed. Each year since, every fourth-grade student in the county has visited the property and learned the importance of our soil, water, forestry, wildlife, and environment. The family has not only graciously hosted this program for the past four years, but they also take an active role in the program. As a result of their excellent management and unselfish sharing of their property, the Rolling Mountain Plantation was selected as the Coosa County TREASURE Forest of the Year for 2012.

Although listed as a secondary objective, recreation is a major theme on Rolling Mountain Plantation. Two cabins, both located on creeks on the property, are utilized regularly by the family to get away from the rat race and reconnect to the land. Many church functions have also been hosted at the cabins. Hatchet Creek traverses the property and is frequently used to cool off on a hot summer day.

In addition to the family hunting both deer and turkey, the property has hosted several deer and turkey hunts for first-time hunters. This includes providing a hunt site during the 2013 TallaCoosa Youth Turkey School, in which Phillip served as an instructor and mentor for the program. Also in 2013, additional shooting/observation houses were constructed. When Phillip’s two young children accompany him to the property as they often do, the shooting houses are just right for allowing the youngsters to observe nature, and/or take a good nap.

Phillip is proud to be an ambassador for the TREASURE Forest program. His father, George, accepted an invitation to become a member of the CCFPC. TREASURE Forest landowners who show a willingness to share their property and expertise with others can be a tremendous asset as members of forestry planning committees. Phillip’s young son, John, has already developed an intense appreciation for

the land. Knowing how important it is to instill a land ethic in children at an early age, we are grateful that the Neighbors’ family is happy to share their time and property to educate youth and adults, promoting the TREASURE Forest program. I am convinced it is imperative that we introduce young people to the outdoors and help them understand the difference between conservation and preservation. Although the kids who attend the adopt-a-school program on the Neighbors property live in a heavily forested rural county with abundant wildlife, most of them have received very little outdoor education. That is a sad fact that the Neighbors and other landowners like them are trying to correct.

As a result of their outstanding stewardship and enduring commitment to teach others, members of the CCFPC decided the Neighbors property would be a great Helene Mosley candidate. The nomination was compiled and submitted for review. It was an honor for our CCFPC members to meet with the Helene Mosley selection team in support of the nomination, and I must admit I became somewhat emotional when I spoke to them about the property and our involvement with the family. I did my best to explain that for me as a natural resource professional, there is incredible gratification in seeing landowners putting recommendations into practice. We anxiously awaited the decision, and having served on numerous Helene Mosley teams in the past, I knew the competition was fierce.

Shortly after the selection team visited the property, we were contacted with the great news that Rolling Mountain Plantation would join the elite group of Alabama properties recognized as Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest award winners. This is a tremendous accomplishment. I will forever think of Phillip and Heather as “my 4-H kids,” and it does my heart good to see them actively engaged in property management using the concepts they were taught so long ago. I know, without a doubt, my time spent with them was definitely time well spent. 🙏