

ALUMNI NEWS


MEDICAL
COLLEGE
OF WISCONSIN

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and expanding minds



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Although **David Wisnefske, MD '75, GME '76**, has retired from his radiology practice, he still cares for one patient very near to his heart: Mother Nature.

His conservation philosophy draws some close parallels to medicine, but bears an even closer resemblance to medical education. While the vast prairie and wooded lands that constitute Dr. Wisnefske's farm in Monroe, Wis., are largely healed thanks to his efforts, younger generations perhaps benefit most from his commitment to passing on the legacy of the outdoors.

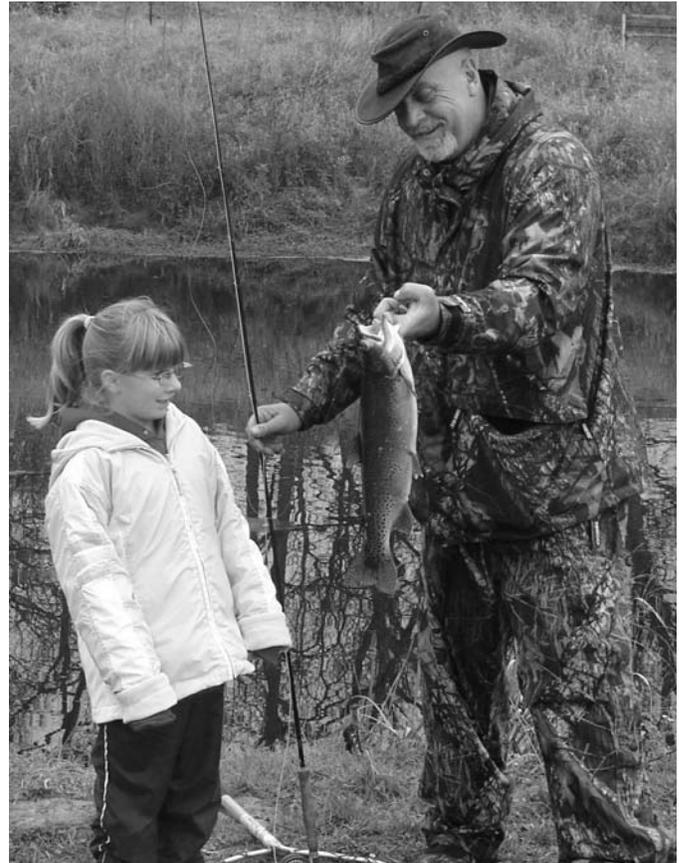
As a result, the youth of the community often make house calls to him, and Dr. Wisnefske welcomes the opportunity to introduce them to Savanna Springs, his name for his farm, nursery and trout pond as well as his prairie restoration business.

A given weekend could find more than 400 people attending a youth hunt/scouting camporee for the Arrowhead District Boy Scouts, for whom Dr. Wisnefske is vice president of program and activities committee chair. On another, Dr. Wisnefske will open the farm to special needs children from Monroe to take a tour, experience wildlife and learn how to fish. For summer school students, Cub Scouts, the 4-H Club and many others, Savanna Springs is a valuable field trip.

Dr. Wisnefske purchased the 217-acre farm in 1990 and began his prairie nursery in 1998. About half of the land is wooded, including a fair amount of native oak savanna. The other half was pasture and crop fields.

"Some of the pasture turned out to be a degraded prairie remnant," he said. "We have repeatedly burned and interseeded these areas, and they are now high quality prairie renovations. The old corn fields we reseeded with prairie grass and are now established prairie restorations. We also had about 20 acres of wetlands that we have improved with seeding and burning."

There are now about 110 acres of restored and renovated wet and dry prairies and about 100 acres of hardwoods and oak savanna on the farm, but Dr. Wisnefske's ideology reaches beyond his property line. The farm is part of a 1,500-acre contiguous block of land managed for wildlife habitat by



David Wisnefske, MD '75, GME '76, examines a rainbow trout caught by one of the special needs students he invited to his farm to learn about fishing and Wisconsin wildlife.

Dr. Wisnefske and his neighbors.

In fact, between public land and that of likeminded property owners, Dr. Wisnefske's farm sits in the middle of nearly 15,000 acres in southern Wisconsin managed for wildlife. This includes 75 acres recently purchased for restoration by his brother **Mark Wisnefske, MD '77**.

Rooted deeply in family, Dr. Wisnefske's interest in conservation and the outdoors is nearly life-long. He began hunting and fishing at a very early age under the tutelage of his father, one of the founding directors of the Wisconsin Bow Hunters.

"I learned from some of the best fishermen, archers and hunters around," he said. "By the time I was 7, you could say it was in my blood. Early on, I could see that my dad enjoyed watching us kids fish and shoot more than he liked doing it

*“The art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor,
but the science of land health has yet to be born.”*

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* – quote that inspired Dr. Wisnefske

himself. Like him, I love to mentor.”

Dr. Wisnefske didn’t need an epiphany to embrace conservation, but he had one nonetheless, and at an opportune time that has allowed him to teach greater numbers of young people about the earth they will inherit. It was 1990. He had just bought his land to use as hunting grounds, and was recently chosen president of his local chapter of Pheasants Forever, a conservation organization. While attending a radiology meeting on Mackinac Island, he wandered into a used bookstore and came across a copy of Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*.

Pheasants Forever had just adopted the Leopold Education Project as its youth program, based on the author’s ecology and environmental philosophies and essays. Dr. Wisnefske had not yet read the book. Leopold’s ideas changed his life, he said, especially one physician-oriented metaphor that has remained with him since:

“In general, the trend of the evidence indicates that in land, just as in the human body, the symptoms may lie in one organ while the cause in another. The practices we now call conservation are, to a large part, local alleviations of biotic pain. They are necessary, but they must not be confused with cures. The art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor, but the science of land health has yet to be born.”¹

The book provided inspiration to use his land and knowledge of the environment to not only improve the local ecosystem but teach others how to carry the torch.

“I guess you could say I wanted to be part of that new medical specialty, and I really enjoy being on the cutting edge of something new,” he said. “My wife called me Dr. Dirt the other day and a lot of the kids call me Prairie Doc, since one of my favorite plants is the elephant ears plant, which is a giant wetland sunflower with huge leaves, also called prairie dock.”

Before he was Dr. Dirt, however, Dr. Wisnefske was a radiologist in private practice. He was drawn to this career as

well. As a 5-year-old he had received two courses of neck radiation to treat recurrent tonsillitis. About 18 months later, he developed alopecia areata, which he always partly blamed on the radiation.

“I went into radiology wanting to be a gatekeeper of some sort but also with the idea of only doing it for 20 years because of my childhood radiation exposure,” said Dr. Wisnefske, who still is involved in some medical education activities and free screening clinics. His primary education efforts, though, are directed at local youth groups.

The impact on his community has been significant. This fall, Dr. Wisnefske helped establish an environmentally-based charter school in Argyle, Wis., called the Argyle Land Ethic Academy. The half-day school based out of Argyle High School is designed for juniors and seniors considering an occupation in conservation and who might perform better outside the conventional classroom.

The academy’s students visit the farm regularly and are currently collecting and growing seeds that will be used to plant a prairie wildflower garden at the town’s fishing pier.

The farm is often host to Pheasants Forever activities, including the seventh annual youth hunt held this fall. Youth hunters and scouts participated in a wildlife and hunting didactic program including archery and gun safety, dog training, a veterinary lecture, turkey calling by the world champion turkey caller, trap shooting and a visit by a friend of Dr. Wisnefske, who brought his Iditarod sled dogs. Participants engaged in one-on-one mentored hunts, and some learned about fishing and cooking.

Staff from the Monroe Clinic Hospital also toured Savannah Springs as part of the hospital’s “Grow the Seeds of the Mission” program, co-chaired by Dr. Wisnefske’s wife, Kristin. Prairie and wildflower seed packets were given to more than 1,100 clinic employees and volunteers to help beautify the community.

Among his other conservation activities, Dr. Wisnefske is secretary of the Wisconsin Stewardship Network, a coalition of more than 75 conservation and environmental groups across the state, and he is serving a three-year term on the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board.

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949

Photos of wildflowers in Dr. Wisnefske’s prairie. See more at <http://savannasprings.com>

