

## **Birding to Bluestem**

When something happens that dramatically enriches the quality of your life it's magical. When that special something serendipitously happens when you are newly retired, engaging in hobbies you have longed to explore post work-life, and reflecting on the purpose of your life henceforward, it is life changing. That magical moment occurred for me in early February 2024 while volunteering at Bluestem Conservation Cemetery.

I learned about Bluestem Conservation Cemetery while on a birding outing, and for two months I eagerly popped out of bed on Fridays to participate in volunteer workdays. Typically, I joined an incredible heart-centered cadre of seasoned volunteers and the visionary Bluestem co-directors and traipsed through the woods clearing areas for future burial sites. Each workday, I departed from Bluestem happy that I had met and shared time with very fine people, worked in the woods--one of my happy places-- gotten a bit of exercise, and supported a conservation, green cemetery—such a cool idea!

On Friday, February 9 my relationship with Bluestem transformed in a most gratifying way. Along with a fellow volunteer, I dug a grave that would host the ashes of a teenager. The parents had selected a beautiful and peaceful spot in the woods under two small beech trees that were surrounded by Christmas ferns, and that was a short distance from a creek. With each shovel full of dirt, I was palpably present to what was happening. I wasn't just digging a hole. Far from it, I was preparing an area to cradle and honor a young man. I felt brought into the sacredness of Nature's beauty, the sacredness of the young man, the sacredness of relationships among those who would mourn his loss and celebrate his life, and the sacredness of the environment that would receive him. I felt drawn into the site's vitality, holiness, and comfort. Once the site was complete, all the volunteers gathered around the grave, listened to a prayer, and then we each read lines from "A Blessing for the Graves." Amidst the words, the silence, and the rustling of the leaves in the wind something shifted for me. This was no ordinary workday; I drove home someone different than the person I was three hours earlier.

The experience transformed me. Prior to that day I was just a volunteer who enjoyed regularly showing up to do whatever was on the to-do list and drove home happy to have participated in the day's activities with others who were supporting this unique venue. But on that fateful day I left with a feeling that went way beyond satisfaction. I left with a profound sense of belonging. I belonged at Bluestem with its reverence that imbues every aspect of this sacred mission--the reverence for the environment, for the people buried there, for their burial traditions, for those who walk the hallowed ground to mourn and celebrate their loved ones, and those who walk it to appreciate the wonders of Nature; and the reverence that exists among the staff and between the volunteers.

The next week I had the honor of being part of a burial crew. Grounded in my new sense of belonging and purpose, I could more easily step outside my egoic self and allow all that is sacred at Bluestem to envelope the site, service, and community as the deceased was honored.

I am deeply grateful that my innocent bird outing at Bluestem migrated into a profound sense of purpose.

Marie Cefalo, Bluestem Volunteer  
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