

A heartfelt farewell: Patti Brown leaving TNI after 15 years

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY - A lot has changed at The Nature Institute (TNI) since Patti Brown took charge as its education director 14 years ago.

Brown has overseen several forms of community outreach during her tenure at TNI. Brown worked as the institute's youth camp director and was responsible for several of its education initiatives over the years, including the "outdoor classroom," which is full of activities for children - each with its own lessons.

"They can go out there and learn about all sorts of things in nature," Brown said. "They can learn about rocks, and how they are made, and learn about our history through fossils left behind."

She has also worked with several local schools and organizations to teach students about everything from astronomy to native plants. Under her directorship, TNI has become integrated into the community through efforts with learning facilities as well as the Riverbend's annual Earth Day celebration and Alton Main Street's Mississippi Earth Tones Festival.



In a bittersweet fashion, however, Brown's work with TNI as its education director will end on March 31, 2017, just a day before TNI's trails open to the public this Saturday. Brown will be passing the torch to Ramona Puskar, who has worked as the assistant education director at TNI for a few years.

"She won't be filling my shoes," Brown said. "She's coming in with her own shoes. She helped teach me a lot. She is an actual environmental educator."

Going out on a high note, Brown was awarded a non-formal "Environmental Educator of the Year" award from the Environmental Education Association of Illinois, where Brown has volunteered during her career at TNI. Previous to coming to TNI, Brown was a part of Illinois's Eco-Watch Program (which is now defunct due to lack of funding), where she helped people keep an eye on the state's essential environmental systems.

"During this time, I have met so many great educators who have helped me and TNI grow," Brown said. "Wherever I went, which was throughout the state, I always plugged TNI."

TNI's Community Outreach Director Amy Curry said Brown was underselling her contributions to TNI, adding Brown has been responsible for "putting TNI on the map," adding Brown has expanded TNI's reputation from simply a great place to hike to a center for environmental education.

"All the work she has done has helped put TNI on the map," Curry said. "We're very fortunate to have her and her experience here. She has done so much for us."

TNI Executive Director Angie Moan said it has been both an honor and a privilege to work with Brown. She said Brown has "made such a difference at TNI."

"She has the ability to make everyone around her excited about nature," Moan said. "She has made a lasting impact on my life. We will miss her. TNI will miss her. She will not be forgotten."

"I just do my job, I've always just done my job," Brown said with tears in her eyes.

"She's done so much more than just her job," Curry said. "This is her life. That's why she's been so good at it for all these years."

When she leaves TNI, Brown will not be leaving nature or environmental education. In fact, she is hoping to do the same thing she has been doing at TNI somewhere with a warmer climate, like Florida or Texas. She said her husband is semi-retired and is looking to move with her to a warmer environment.

Moan said Brown's impact will not be forgotten by anyone who has worked with her or learned from her. Moan said her 17-year-old son still had a bowl he crafted while in Brown's summer camp.

Replacing Brown will be Puskar. Brown said she was excited to see Puskar put more of her creative ideas into action at TNI. When Puskar started, she said Brown was extremely open to her new ideas. Puskar took the position of camp director from Brown recently, causing several to speculate Brown may be leaving. Brown did not formally announce her departure from TNI until this week, however.

"I think I have the easy part of taking what Patti has built and running with it," Puskar said. "She had to build this all up from nothing. I'll be taking it over with the best of the best."

Both Brown and Curry said TNI is functioning better than it ever has with great communication between directors and the board as well as a commitment to more community outreach initiatives.

"TNI is part of the community now," Brown said.