

Profiles

IN



CONSERVATION

Chesapeake Forest Champion Sought Place for Daughter to Ride Horses

By Devin Wanner

John Shilling and his wife, Jane Pratt, were living in Washington, DC, working for World Bank, and traveling near Purcellville, VA, on weekends to take their youngest daughter to horseback riding lessons. “We started looking at property in the area, but soon realized that we wanted to renovate every house we looked at,” recalled Mr. Shilling. “My wife and I decided we would be better off buying vacant property [for their daughter to ride horses] and building our own dream house.”



Working with a blank canvas, John Shilling and Jane Pratt have transformed pastureland into something special. (Courtesy photo provided by John Shilling)



The landscape starts showing signs of change a few years after trees are planted. (Courtesy photo by Virginia Division of Forestry)

Their real estate agent contacted them regarding a 25-acre parcel that had come on the market. The parcel was a portion of a 360-acre dairy farm. The farm had been subdivided; after the farmer died, his widow was forced to sell one lot to settle estate taxes. They purchased the initial property in 1991.

“My wife was very concerned about environmental issues. During construction of the house, she asked the construction crew how many trees were being used to build our house,” Shilling remembered. The construction crew estimated that it took about 32 trees to provide the lumber required to build the house. “She made up her mind right then that our first priority would be to plant 32 trees to replenish the trees that went into making our home,” said Shilling.

“What impresses me most about John is his level of commitment,” said Dingus. “He just doesn’t mess around. When a recommendation is brought forward, he gets right to work implementing the plan. And he is really good at monitoring practices.”

Six years later, after the farmer’s widow passed away, the family decided to sell off the rest of the farm in 15- to 30-acre lots. The Shillings purchased an additional 30-acre lot adjacent to theirs in 1997.

The Shillings contacted the Virginia Department of Forestry in 1998 for assistance planting trees on their property. They planted 8,000 loblolly pines and 3,000 mixed hardwood trees. “Part of the reason for our desire to plant the trees was to screen the view of lots other people bought where they intended to build houses,” said Shilling. “It was amazing how quickly the planting went. The crew came out and planted all 11,000 seedlings in one day. One person plowed the field while another walked behind with a stick post in one hand and seedlings in the other. As he walked along he would jab the stick into the ground, take a seedling and put it in the hole, and tramp the soil with his foot. And again my wife was very instrumental in getting the project going,” Shilling concluded.

Those trees have since grown to a point where in a few years John would like to do some thinning of the pine forest and replant with a mixture of hardwoods to create a more natural mixture.

Kyle Dingus, Virginia Department of Forestry Area Forester for northern Virginia, met Shilling in 2014. He worked with Shilling to help him manage his forest land and get the property into the Chesapeake Forest Fund pilot program. Under the program, landowners with property in counties within the Chesapeake Bay watershed could obtain funding for planting and maintenance of native trees at no cost to the landowner. Shilling was able to utilize this program to undertake an additional tree planting on the hillside that was completed in 2015. “That program fully paid for the remaining acres of his planted parcel to be completed,” Dingus said. The majority of their property is now planted in trees except for around the house, which looks more like a park.



Trees rise majestically reaching for the sky. (Courtesy photo by Kyle Dingus, Virginia Division of Forestry)



The Chesapeake Forest Fund Program provided financial assistance for the latest round of tree planting. (Courtesy photo by Kyle Dingus, Virginia Division of Forestry)



Beautiful views abound on Shilling's property. (Courtesy photo by John Shilling)

The yard is more open and has a more park-like atmosphere than the surrounding woods. (Courtesy photo by John Shilling)

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Jane Pratt was very involved with environmental pursuits. “Jane worked at World Bank, but was getting tired of the direction the organization was going. She helped establish the focus and direction of the Mountain Institute. She had a friend who was on the Board of Directors for the Mountain Institute who encouraged her to join the institute. Her desire was to make the organization more internationally oriented and focused on both mountain ecosystems and cultures,” recalled Shilling.



Jane Pratt. (Courtesy photo by John Shilling)

The Mountain Institute was established in Cherry Grove, WV, in 1972 as the Woodlands and Whitewater Institute. It became an international organization in 1987. The mission of the Mountain Institute is to work with mountain people to transform their livelihoods, protect their cultures, and conserve natural resources.

Pratt served as President and CEO of the Mountain Institute from 1994 to 2002. During her tenure she led a leadership transition, focused the institute’s mission, and pioneered new programs and partnerships in Asia, Latin America, and around the world.



Jane Pratt. (Courtesy photo by John Shilling)



Jenny McGarvey of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (left) and Sally Claggett of the USDA Forest Service (right) present John Shilling with the Chesapeake Forest Champion Award at the 12th annual Chesapeake Watershed Forum in Shepherdstown, WV, on Friday, November 3, 2017. (Courtesy photo by Will Parson, Chesapeake Bay Program)

Pratt passed away in 2013.

“John has a deep passion for what he is doing. He is very committed to continuing the legacy of his wife,” Dingus said.

In 2017, Dingus nominated Schilling for the Chesapeake Forest Champion Award under the Exemplary Forest Steward category.

In his nomination of Shilling, Dingus stated, “He has worked with the Virginia Department of Forestry since 1998 and has planted all 31 acres of one of his parcels in hardwoods and loblolly pine. His property is in a conservation easement, and he has focused on establishing trees in riparian buffers and his open fields to improve the health of the land and do the right thing environmentally. Not only have the tree plantings benefited riparian areas, he has a mosaic of diverse forest cover types that benefits wildlife and contributes to biodiversity.”

“He regularly checks the planted trees and faithfully completes the maintenance required. In his adjacent pine forest he has participated in cost share from the Virginia Division of Forestry to treat a variety of invasive plants including Japanese stiltgrass, honeysuckle, and multiflora rose, among others that are threatening the health and development of his forest land. Given that invasive plants are a huge threat in northern Virginia, this work is important to protect his forests,” stated Dingus.

Dingus has met a lot of forest landowners in his line of work. “John has stood out to me because of his passion for managing his property and his fervor in implementing my recommendations. He has a positive attitude and willingness to learn about programs,” he said.

“It is fascinating to see what he has accomplished. In about 20 years he has converted marginal farm pasture into a mosaic of pine, hardwood, and riparian forest. He has also protected water quality, for which I am proud to have been a part,” said Dingus.



Working with the Virginia Division of Forestry, John and Jane had 3,000 loblolly pine trees planted on their property in 1998. (Courtesy photo by Kyle Dingus, Virginia Division of Forestry)



Tree planting provides important conservation benefits, such as creating new wildlife habitat and improving air and water quality. (Courtesy photo by Kyle Dingus, Virginia Division of Forestry)

“I see the work that he has done as a model to show other landowners that in one’s lifetime you can take marginal land and mold it for the good of conservation. That is why his story is so important: he bought his property, sought assistance for management, implemented recommended projects, and even has a conservation easement that will protect the hard work! He shows concern and respect for his land and his passion is contagious,” Dingus finished.



Rows of pine trees now stand in what was once a farm pasture with grazing cows. (Courtesy photo by Kyle Dingus, Virginia Division of Forestry)



Comparison of the property with earlier photos shows what can be accomplished over time. (Courtesy photo by Virginia Division of Forestry)

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