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THIS IS MICHIGAN

stories of our state



Legacy in land: Protecting rare fens, century farms and other natural habitats in Michigan

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This Is Michigan | Conserving Land, Creating a Legacy



+ TRANSCRIPT

DIANA KERN

Executive Director

Legacy Land Conservancy

People like nature. And people find peace and engage in nature. So all of us benefit from that.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

2011 U-M Alum, Program in the Environment & Political Science

Land Protection Director, Legacy Land Conservancy

Right now there are a lot of threats to that natural world. We're gonna lose a lot of this biodiversity, this freshwater resource if we don't take responsibility for it and try to protect it.

DIANA ARNOLD

MICHAEL N. ARNOLD

Landowners

We're more what we call environmentalist, you know, and we want, uh, a clean, pristine earth

And you don't come across these things anymore like this.

AMANDA IRWIN

TOM IRWIN

Landowners

When you have a huge parcel of ground like this with woods and water and farmland and open space, it's irreplaceable.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

There is still a lot of work to do.

The work to fight climate change, to help farmers continue to farm, to allow communities access to natural habitats, comes in the form of conserving land and creating a legacy.

TOM IRWIN

Who doesn't want to create a legacy?

A LEGACY is defined as something passed on. It can be ethics, traits or traditions. It can take the form of assets like land. No matter the gift, the legacy can have a lasting impact on peoples' futures.

Founded in 1971, Legacy Land Conservancy is Michigan's oldest organization dedicated to the voluntary conservation of locally important land.

DIANA KERN

We're over 10,000 acres of protected land. We've also placed a little over a hundred conservation easements.

Legacy Land Conservancy protects land by obtaining funding to create easements and public preserves.

All of it benefits landowners, farmers and entire communities.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

As land protection director, I help work with landowners to conserve their property.

For over four years, U-M alum Susan LaCroix has worked at Legacy Land Conservancy.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

We also do farmland conservation, making sure that farmers have access to affordable lands.

TOM IRWIN

My great-great-great grandfather started the generation of Irwins living on living on this farm. And it has passed directly from father to son for six generations and my daughters will be generation number seven.

With Susan's assistance, the Irwins successfully placed their land under a conservation easement.

Mike and Diana Arnold own a beautiful fen out in Jackson County. A fen is an important and unique wetland type that is a hotspot of biodiversity.

MIKE ARNOLD

Ours is one of the new fens left in Michigan. It's a special ecosystem and it has some of the rare animals and plants in it.

Fens require thousands of years to develop and cannot easily be restored if destroyed.

MIKE ARNOLD

We ran into Susan and we kind of hit it off real good. So she's the main reason why we decided to protect the property.

Susan's role models for conservation came from her grandparents. When she was younger, they created a community-based foundation to protect the water quality of Higgins Lake, Michigan.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

When I started at U-M, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do with myself. During my freshman year, my grandfather passed away and that helped me see that I wanted to carry on his legacy that he's worked on.

REBECCA HARDIN

Associate Professor

U-M School for Environment and Sustainability

The University of Michigan is about making knowledge accessible and actionable for positive change. It's not just about teaching it, it's about doing it. And here's where someone like Susan makes a huge difference.

In 2011, she graduated with dual degrees in the Program in the Environment and Political Science.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

My degree at SEAS or Program in the Environment helped me get to where I want to be in my career, to work in environmental conservation. Ultimately, I would like to be able to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and truly continue on the legacy that he started.

SUE MORLEY

Susan LaCroix's Grandmother

I'm very proud of her and I think my husband would really be proud.

REBECCA HARDIN

That is the kind of leadership that's gonna matter to our world's resiliency and our ability to confront crises in the ways that make us the most human.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

I want to ensure that children growing up now or in 50 years also have those green spaces to get out and explore the world and learn about environmental conservation themselves.

TOM IRWIN

We want to see this beauty passed on and passed on both ecologically and financially.

AMANDA IRWIN

Yeah, it definitely feels like we're part of a bigger story, part of a bigger plan, and we just love the fact that we're gonna be able to leave something behind.

SUSAN MORLEY LACROIX

I am able to give back to the environment that I have been able to find peace in.

Video Produced by Bob Berg, *Michigan Media* (<https://media.umich.edu/>).

All photos by Eric Bronson, *Michigan Photography* (<https://photography.umich.edu/>).

BY GRETA GUEST, MICHIGAN NEWS

BROOKLYN, Michigan—The sun glows bright behind a fast-moving cloud and dew shines translucent on the lush, green fields. A tabby cat pounces from a nearby tree into tall grass below as Diana and Michael Arnold survey their farm.



Michael and Diana Arnold at their farm in Brooklyn, Michigan.

They point toward what appears like wetlands or a swamp. The only sounds are the rhythmic flapping of four sandhill cranes passing through and the rustling of a Bradford pear tree's round leaves.

Past the meadow, gentle hills slope around an extremely rare ecosystem known as a prairie fen. These fens, which take thousands of years to develop, exist predominantly in southern lower Michigan and occur where cold, alkaline groundwater bubbles to the surface. The springs feed rivers and lakes with clean water.



Various views of the Arnold Farm in Brooklyn, Michigan.

“Ours is one of the few fens left in Michigan,” Michael Arnold said. “It’s a special ecosystem and it has some rare animals and plants in it.”

To protect these rare animals and plants—white lady-slipper orchid, southern wild rice, eastern massasauga rattlesnake, gray ratsnake, Blanding’s turtle, monarch butterfly, bald eagle and mussels like the slippershell—the Arnolds turned to Legacy Land Conservancy to permanently protect 89 acres of their eastern Jackson County farm that includes the fen through a conservation easement.

A conservation easement permanently protects private land by limiting the type and amount of development on a property, and restricting other uses that would damage natural features such as rich soils and high functioning wetlands.



Legacy Land Conservancy, founded in 1971, is Michigan's oldest organization dedicated to the voluntary conservation of locally important land.

"We're over 10,000 acres of protected land. We've also placed a little over 100 conservation easements," said Susan Morley LaCroix, who graduated from the University of Michigan in 2011 with dual degrees from the Program in the Environment and Department of Political Science, and is the conservancy's land protection director.

The conservancy protects land by obtaining public and private funding to create easements and public preserves.

**"SUSAN LACROIX TOOK OVER OUR CASE FOR SETTING UP TO
HAVE PROTECTION. AND WE HIT IT OFF REALLY GOOD... SO I
WOULD SAY THAT SHE'S THE MAIN REASON WHY WE DECIDED
TO PROTECT THE PROPERTY."**

~ Michael Arnold, who sold development rights to his Brooklyn farm to the Legacy Land
Conservancy

"All of it benefits landowners, farmers and entire communities," LaCroix said. "Right now, there are a lot of threats to that natural world. We're going to lose a lot of this biodiversity, this freshwater resource if we don't take responsibility for it and try to protect it. We also do farmland conservation, making sure that farmers have access to affordable lands."



The conservancy paid the Arnolds for the development rights on the 89-acre property so it can never be developed. The land can still be used for low-impact farming in some places, but the fen won't be changed.

"Susan LaCroix took over our case for setting up to have protection. And we hit it off really good," Michael Arnold said. "We liked her and we liked the work she did and informational things that she presented to us and everything. So I would say that she's the main reason why we decided to protect the property."

PRESERVING FARMS

LaCroix also worked with the Irwin family in 2021 to preserve their sesquicentennial farm, which was at risk for development. The 158-acre farm in Grass Lake features rolling farmland, forest and wetlands. It's owned by brothers Tom and Jim Irwin, who inherited the farm from their late father, Richard (Dick) Irwin.



Susan Morley LaCroix, who graduated from the University of Michigan in 2011 with dual degrees from the Program in the Environment and Department of Political Science, is the Legacy Land Conservancy's land protection director.

"When you have a huge parcel of ground like this with woods and water and farmland and open space, it's irreplaceable," Tom Irwin said. "My great-great-great grandfather started the generation of Irwins living on this farm. And it has passed directly from father to son for six generations, and my daughters will be generation number seven."



Susan Morley LaCroix meets with colleagues at the Legacy Land Conservancy.

Tom and Amanda Irwin were living in Illinois with their daughters when his father passed. While the farmland featured high-quality soil, barns and a house were in disrepair. It would have been tough financially to make the move back to Michigan, he said.

“And most people, when they’re in this situation, they hit a fork in the road. They either have to figure out a way to borrow a lot of money or they have to liquidate to be able to afford to restore a home or restore a farm,” Tom Irwin said.

And that’s where the conservation easement with Legacy Land Conservancy came in. Half of the farm had already been preserved by their father that way. And the funds from the conservation easement made it possible for Tom Irwin and his family to return to the farm and restore the house where they live.



Tom and Amanda Irwin were living in Illinois with their daughters when his father passed. The family moved back to Michigan to work the farm and improve the brands and buildings.

“Honestly, it’s the only way that I can afford to move my wife and my two girls from Illinois back to Michigan to our family homestead to continue this story,” he said. “Without Legacy and their help, it would have been nearly impossible.”

The brothers are passing on the accumulated knowledge of six generations to Tom’s daughters, teaching them how to farm, how to sell produce at a roadside stand and how to raise livestock.

“Yeah it definitely feels like we’re part of a bigger story, part of a bigger plan, and we just love the fact that we’re gonna be able to leave something behind,” Amanda Irwin said.



The Irwin family's sesquicentennial farm, owned by brothers Tom and Jim Irwin. The 158-acre farm in Grass Lake features rolling farmland, forest and wetlands.

LEGACY OF THE LAKE

Much like the Irwins, LaCroix was inspired by her ancestors. While her father was in the U.S. Navy, the family moved around. LaCroix considered the family's summer cottage at Higgins Lake her real home, and it's one her family has enjoyed for six generations.



Her grandfather, Robert S. Morley, founded the Higgins Lake Foundation, and she spent many summer days helping her grandparents in the work of raising awareness of environmental threats to the lake. Their tagline was “Our lake, our responsibility.”



The Irwin girls fish at the farm.

They took a community-based conservation approach—engaging the public, educating them, talking about issues the lake faces and in conserving land through conservation easements and preserves.

LaCroix says she “feels a strong sense of that responsibility to be able to carry out the great work my grandfather started ... to ensure that other generations are able to also have a similar childhood of growing up and loving this lake.”

Her grandmother, Sue Morley, said: “I’m very proud of her, and I think my husband would be really proud.

“Susan and most of our grandchildren helped to start this by licking stamps and sending out envelopes,” she said. “We wanted to educate our children to take care of the property and take care of the lake and keep it clean and updated because without that, our land isn’t going to be worth anything to anybody.”

LaCroix said those lessons her grandparents instilled in her guide her thoughts today. She wants to ensure that children growing up today or in 50 years also have green spaces to explore.

“There is still a lot of work to do,” LaCroix said. “The work to fight climate change, to help farmers continue to farm, to allow communities access to natural habitats, comes in the form of conserving land and creating a legacy.”

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