

Conservation easement protects the ‘wonder’ of Prairiewood Retreat and Preserve

By **Rachel Hogan** - Jul 8, 2019



A conservation easement from the Kansas Land Trust will protect 186 acres of Prairiewood Retreat and Preserve's tallgrass prairie land holdings from future development. This includes part of Willis Prairie. (Rachel Hogan | Collegian Media Group)

Prairiewood Retreat and Preserve spent Sunday evening in quiet celebration of a conservation easement that will protect 186 acres of its native tallgrass prairie.

The easement will permanently protect part of Prairiewood's land holding from any development, furthering owners Kail and Becky Katzenmeier's hopes of using the prairie to enrich lives.

"I think, like all natural landscapes that are magical in one way or another, you sort of lay there and whether it's gazing at the stars or the fireflies, you feel something bigger than yourself," Kail Katzenmeier said. "The prairie has an opportunity to open those doors ... in really compelling ways. By preserving the land in its open state, its native state, we're sort of affording the opportunity for ages and ages of people to be able to participate and have those same experiences."

Katzenmeier said the process of obtaining the conservation easement was a collaborative effort with the Kansas Land Trust and Fort Riley's Army Compatible Use Buffer Program that took

more than five years, with the first email being sent to Kansas Land Trust executive director Jerry Jost six-and-a-half years ago.

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"It was a lot of red tape a lot of coordination, a lot of changes within institutions that we had to ride along with until, finally, all the stars aligned and it came together," Katzenmeier said. "It was a long process, but it was worth it."

That process included site visits, appraisals and term negotiations. Jost said it generally takes one to two years to finalize a conservation easement, but Prairiewood's took longer due to land reconfiguration and changes in funding.

Jost said Fort Riley provided the funding to obtain the easement.

"They want to have compatible development around the installation," Jost said. "Essentially, they don't want to have residential homes that are quite close to the boundary. There'd be concerns about training exercises and noise, things like that."



Lawrence-based ecologist and educator Courtney Masterson kneels among the grasses on Willis Prairie during a hike as part of the Non-Groundbreaking Celebration. (Rachel Hogan | Collegian Media Group)

Sunday's "non-groundbreaking" celebration began with a hike on the Willis Prairie led by ecologist and educator Courtney Masterson, who educated visitors on native and naturalized plant species. The hike was followed by refreshments in the Blue Sage Barn and then by a dedication ceremony featuring music from Manhattan High School's chamber orchestra and a reading by Lawrence-based poet Megan Kaminski.

During the dedication, Katzenmeier shared a few memories of Willis Prairie's namesakes, Jean and Bill Willis. The Willises were two neighbors who welcomed the Katzenmeiers to the Wildcat Creek area when they first moved there.

"They embodied so many of the things today that we still are trying to aim for," Katzenmeier said, sharing a few memories that encapsulate the qualities of welcome, wonder, curiosity and imagination held by his old neighbors and the prairie that shares their name.

For instance, Katzenmeier recalled, Bill would remark at the blooms of that year's evening primrose.

"In that moment, he was capturing that thing we called wonder, when he's tapped into something bigger than himself that we all feel mesmerized by, to experience that in our own ways and in our own lives."

Katzenmeier said Willis had waited to build a home on an apple orchard near Wildcat Creek in order to share the experience with his children.



*A line of hikers ascend the ridge on Willis Prairie at Prairiewood Retreat and Preserve.
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"He said, 'You know, I waited to build because I wanted my kids to be a part of the process of building that house because I wanted them to understand what it means to envision something, and imagine something and actually bring it to reality,'" Katzenmeier said. "And that sounds a little familiar for what we've been doing for the last eight or ten years."

Moving forward, Katzenmeier said he hopes Prairiewood's conservation can help expand welcome, wonder, curiosity and imagination in the community and world at large.