

SACRED GROUND

To the future owner of my property,

Congratulations. You are the new owner of land that I once loved and cared for. Because our time on this earth is very short and our life spans may not cross, it is important that I pass on some of my thoughts to you about its importance, not only to you but to others, as well. You see, I am the original Grantor of the Conservation Easement that you agreed to abide by when you purchased this property.

Like me, you have the privilege of protecting and enjoying this wonderful land. Yes, just in case you haven't thought about it, owning this property is truly a privilege. It has only been loaned to us by our Creator to enjoy and protect during our lifetimes. Therefore, it should be passed on in an undamaged state, so that future generations may also reap its benefits.

The property isn't just woodland and fields that haven't yet been subdivided into squared-off sites for trailers or suburban homes and lawns. Actually, it's a small part of a great watershed that is essential to the health of local communities and to the survival of many wild plant and animal species. Just taking time to walk over the property through the seasons of the year will help you understand the importance of preserving its open spaces for the future. Travel through the woods and fields in the spring, and you'll see May apple, spring beauties, bluets, and other wildflowers in full bloom. In the summer there will be lush green pastures to lie in while watching thunderstorms light up the sky. In October (my favorite month of the year), leaves from maple, hickory and oak will change the woods into striking blends of red and yellow. Winter will come quickly, and you'll be a witness to the quiet beauty of snow falling on the bank of the North River. March will finally arrive, followed by high winds and new beginnings of growth on the stark landscape. The cycle of life and death in the natural world of this property continues year after year, as it will when you and I are gone.

Take time to listen to the land. Have you been down to the field by the river and felt the wind coursing through the pines in the evening? Have you heard the sound of the pileated woodpecker in the early morning near the cabin in August? Have been up early to listen for the snort of a deer in the woods below "High Knob" in October, or the gobbling of a turkey in April, near the walnut opening? Have you heard the sound of the North River in the summer, beckoning you to shed your clothes and jump in?

This property is about people, too. It's about friends and family enjoying the companionship of a day in the woods and open air. I hope you will be able to share experiences and friendships similar to those that I have enjoyed as a result of owning this wonderful piece of West Virginia, of our country. Times sitting with my parents at the bottom of the hill below the cabin, watching for a glimpse of a deer... visits from my brother and his family and with my sister, hunting, fishing, or just hiking...the wide-eyed wonder in the eyes of my friends' children as they reel in their first fish from a pond or the river, and watching these same children come back every year, all of a sudden growing into

young adults...endless discussions with friends about work, religion, hunting, fishing, the state of the world, and the future.

It's been such a pleasure getting to know and share with my Hampshire County neighbors who have contributed so much to my joy of being on the land. Open up your heart to your neighbors and to the people in the surrounding area and you'll be richly rewarded.

Not all in my life has been joy. I have shared dark moments with the land, as well. Above all, I experienced grief that could not be contained for almost two years as a result of the breakup of my marriage. Being on the property during that time invoked too many memories, and I came so close to selling out, to giving up on myself and everything that I believed in. But as I healed over time, the land again began to bring me happiness, restoring my sense of place in this world.

This "sense of place" - I suppose that's what it's all about for me and for others who believe so strongly in a particular chunk of this earth. It becomes so much a part of us that we will do everything possible to ensure that it will not be harmed when we're not around to care for it. Above all, I thank God for the opportunity to provide a permanent home for the wildlife that inhabits and visits this property. I don't believe I would ever be able to leave this world in peace, knowing that someone was just around the corner, waiting to cut up and destroy something that is such a part of me.

As far as I'm concerned, what you're protecting is sacred ground. Treat it in that manner and it will give you back everything you've ever hoped for, and more. Treat it poorly, and you'll have to appear in court to explain your betrayal to the land that could have embraced and nurtured your soul. I know people who feel exactly the way I do about protecting this property - people who work for the Land Trusts to which this Easement has been entrusted. As time passes on, I am confident that others will replace them with the same dedication.

Please do not misunderstand me. I don't stand here as someone who sits in judgement of others. In fact, my own selfishness, shortsightedness, or other weakness has caused most of my problems throughout the years. However, because this land has added so much richness to my life, protecting it through this Easement is a way to pay back a debt that I've owed for a long time.

I have spent my entire career in wildlife law enforcement. Although it has been very satisfying work, I have always wondered how I could make a contribution to our natural world that would last beyond my lifetime. Knowing now that future generations will enjoy the comforting silence from this land on evenings when the stars seem to go on forever closes this chapter in my life.

John D. Gavitt
July 28, 2000