

Mentors Changes Lives...Find One and Be One!

By Deb Beazley

It sounds odd, but often mentors don't even know they are mentors. Rarely do they solicit any special notice and most would say they don't feel worthy of such attention, which of course is just one more reason we admire them.

There are many mentors among us simply doing whatever they do every day and yet, unknowingly, they may be guiding someone through life lending experience, skill, knowledge, happiness, even goals. Their effect can be immeasurable and last a lifetime. Certainly a mentor can have many students but imagine the great fortune to have many mentors. As naturalists with the Warner Park Nature Center in Nashville, Sandy Bivens and I were just that fortunate.



Mack Prichard's career as Tennessee State Parks Naturalist, and now as Tennessee State Parks Naturalist Emeritus, touches thousands of lives as he continues to share his love of Tennessee's natural wonders. He is seen at left next to Polly Rooker, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency biologist. *Photo by Deb Beazley.*

We met Dr. Charles Farrell in 1977. His lessons remain deep within us, guiding us even today. The wisdom he shared was astounding. He had just retired as a zoologist from Vanderbilt University when he agreed to work at the nature center. He was a traditional teacher who simply knew everything about everything, from the soil to the stars, but even more endearing (and telling) was that he never lost the wonderment and joy of even the most everyday encounter with nature, a most valuable lesson that is ingrained within us because of our mentor.

Every day we got to follow Dr. Farrell around like a couple of school kids on a favorite field trip, soaking up every word he spoke like a sponge. We learned early on to write everything down because "pale ink is better than the finest memory," one of his favorite proverbs. I cannot begin to count how many times I have passed on this little bit of wisdom. He also encouraged us to keep log books each day to record sightings, details, events, people, the weather, anything we felt pertinent to mention or even to draw. Having just entered into my 69th log book, I can thank Dr. Farrell for sharing this proverbial lesson.

Along with his vast knowledge of natural history, Dr. Farrell also enjoyed reciting these proverbs and poems, which amazed us even more. For him it was as easy as recalling the letters of the alphabet, even though some of them were very long indeed. He could even quote the poem "Evolution" from memory; all 12 stanzas!

We first heard about the proverbial "camel's nose in the tent" story from Dr. Farrell, I love that one, and it is so telling. He also taught us basic life management skills, such as a way to manage many potentially irritating or stressful situations with this simple quip: "understand the innate perversity of inanimate objects." I have shared that tidbit hundreds of times since for all the young people working here who get upset because the mower won't start, or their saw gets stuck in the branch they are cutting, whatever the situation. Dr. Farrell has helped me, and hopefully many others, to just relax, breathe, take a moment and carry on. Dr. Farrell guided my future as well, when he told me (way back) that the higher up the ladder you climb the less you get to do the things you enjoy. I have never applied for a promotion and I love my job of 34 years! He was simply amazing.

Dr. Farrell loved and appreciated all of nature, expressing delight with each bug, tree, rock or

whatever he was explaining to us, and we learned to share and convey those feelings. We listened with awe each time he talked about his extensive research projects, especially those involving vultures and chiggers, arguably two of the most misunderstood and disliked creatures among us! He would bring his pet vulture "Ugly Face" to work with him, tether it under a walnut tree for anyone willing to understand it as an intelligent and beautiful bird. He tethered chiggers too, but under tape on his arm at night to study the effects of their bites. His research paid off as evidenced through the book he wrote about them for his doctoral thesis. He was truly fascinating.

Having Dr. Farrell as a mentor was special enough, but he also became a channel through which we met many other remarkable people, each becoming mentors distinct and important in their own way.

The Warner Park Nature Center is a first class banding station today because we were introduced to Dr. Katherine Goodpasture, also in 1977. She was a woman small in stature but ever so large in her knowledge of and love for birds. As one of the nation's premier bird banders, she sponsored many younger protégées including Sandy, who became the first licensed bird bander at Warner Park and has since encouraged and sponsored many other banders as well.

We were thrilled when "Mrs. G." invited us for bird banding at her very special, pristine retreat known as Basin Spring. There we would sit for hours enjoying her stories while learning to listen to the melody of songs coming from the trees. Suddenly she would stop, raise a nimble finger, look up as if seeing an old friend, and say "black throated green." We would look at each other in awe and inspiration. Sandy soon learned to recognize these songs and has taught hundreds of others to try as well.

One of the most special research projects to occur in the Warner Parks involves bluebirds and gives us two more amazing mentors in Amelia Laskey and Virginia Price. While we never had the honor of meeting Mrs. Laskey, we quickly learned that she was a legend among ornithologists for her research on birds. She began the bluebird nesting box program in the Warner Parks in 1936, keeping meticulous and extensive records that are astounding still. Recognizing her dedication is both inspiring and humbling making her a most deserving mentor. Virginia Price trained with her friend and mentor Amelia Laskey (1885-1973) and following her death in 1973, Mrs. Price was proud to continue this invaluable bluebird program. By 1977 she was training Sandy and me how to manage this project that is now the oldest continuously monitored bluebird nesting and banding program in the country.

Mentors do make a difference. Virginia Price also proved to be a most caring individual, exposing us to true dedication to a cause by volunteering. She managed a bird sanctuary at her home, giving much of her time and resources to care for injured and orphaned feathered friends.

Two of Dr. Farrell's peers at Vanderbilt inspired both Sandy and me to begin what became a lifelong love of botany. We soon understood that both Drs. Elsie Quarterman and Robert Kral were renowned and legendary botanists in Tennessee. At Cedars of Lebanon State Park, Dr. Quarterman led our very first wildflower pilgrimage. Initially, the hot limestone glade looked bare and uninteresting to two novices, until Dr. Quarterman opened our eyes to the world of endemic wildflowers. With great poise she quietly exuded enthusiasm, love, concern, and vast knowledge of these rare beauties. We were then fortunately allowed to audit Dr. Kral's botany class at the university. With his military-like tactics toward learning plants (so very different from Dr. Quarterman), we then understood what it really takes to train, study and focus on successful plant identification. It was hard and I guess Dr. Kral noticed that I was not quite as studious as Sandy when he quipped one day "I guess you are the one more interested in animals!" We both passed the course and apparently passed his scrutiny as well because he continues to teach and put up with us still. Now, after all these years and having led hundreds of wildflower walks, I owe much of my

approach and teaching skills to the indelible impressions left by these two mentors.

Another memorable mentor we met in the summer of 1977 is Mack Prichard, Tennessee State Parks Naturalist Emeritus. I will never forget the enthusiasm he spread across the audience while giving his slide presentation highlighting the wonders of Tennessee. His passion toward exploring the gorgeous natural areas of our great state while conserving its natural beauty was nothing short of spectacular and Mack's shows are still some of the most inspiring I have ever experienced. My slide shows might be judged somewhat successful if I feel that I conveyed even half of that passion. That is what mentors do, they inspire emulation.

Almost every time I look through a camera lens I try to emulate another special mentor, John Netherton, one of the best nature photographers ever. Dr. Farrell knew John from their efforts to save Radnor Lake in Nashville, and again we gained from yet another introduction. John's ethics involving photography were supremely unselfish and genuine. He taught that the subject was always more important than the shot, and as a photographer we have an obligation to enter a scene with as little impact as possible, and certainly to do no harm to the subject. John produced some of the most gorgeous and moving images I have ever seen while always staying true to his principles. Again, mentors inspire emulation.

Taking care not to harm what you are enjoying or learning about is an invaluable life lesson that all of our mentors practiced. We met Doug Pelren, fisheries biologist with Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, in 1977 when Dr. Farrell arranged for Doug to lead an electro-fishing session for our Youth Conservation Corps that summer. Doug showed us how they shock fish just enough to briefly stun them as a method of surveying streams and fish populations. It was one of the most captivating and interesting things we have ever done under the guise of research. Having both Doug and Dr. Farrell there to describe the fish, the stream and pretty much every single thing in it was truly amazing. We have had many electro-fishing expeditions since then and every one is always special thanks to our superb initiation by two of the very best in the field of research, education and conservation.

We owe so much to Dr. Farrell (1909-1989) and indeed many of his peers. He introduced us to the greatest naturalists of the era, including Dr. Katherine Goodpasture (1909-1995); Virginia Price (1917-2006); Dr. Elsie Quarterman; Dr. Robert Kral; Mack Prichard; John Netherton (1948-2001); Doug Pelren, and many others. We learned about bird banding, bird rehabilitation, botany, zoology, astronomy, geology, weather, photography, fish and stream surveying, poetry, mythology, stress management, life goals, and a simple passion for and love of nature.

From all of these wonderful mentors that we first met in the late seventies and early eighties we gained a lifetime of knowledge and lessons that we have built upon ever since. Times have certainly changed, but for Sandy and me when confronted with all the many issues of today we often think back...what would Dr. Farrell do? The answer is always there in his inspiring words..."keep on fighting," just another example of his simple brilliance. It is very true that mentors change lives, so find one and be one.

(Deb Beazley is a naturalist with the Warner Park Nature Center in Nashville. She enjoys sharing her love and knowledge of nature with anyone willing to listen and learn, and credits her mentors for much of her success.)