

Board Member Spotlight: Isidore “Bill” Mineo

by Dan R. Kunkle

The history of Lehigh Gap Nature Center begins in 2001 when Grant White, one of our Board members at that time, convinced me that it would be a good idea to try to establish a nature center at Lehigh Gap on the Palmerton Superfund site. The land he proposed for the center was located on the slopes of the Kittatinny Ridge (Blue Mountain) in the Gap itself and on the north slope of the ridge from the Gap to the PA Turnpike tunnel. Along its entire 2.8-mile length, the land would border the proposed new Delaware and Lehigh (D&L) National Heritage Corridor Trail.

This was such a daunting project that I was at a loss as to where to start. The mountainside was barren and contaminated with heavy metals and plagued by erosion. Our organization (at the time Wildlife Information Center, Inc.) with a \$30,000-a-year budget

and no paid staff had to raise almost a million dollars to purchase the land and an old stone home on one of the pieces of land that White envisioned constituting the refuge. We had raised about \$100,000 previously, so we had a start, but we still had a long way to go. I was not sure the whole idea would be possible. Grant suggested we meet with the D&L Trail Manager to discuss the idea.

In February 2002, Board members Bob Hoopes, White, and I met with *Bill Mineo*, the D&L Trail Manager. The meeting and the man with whom we met both proved to be pivotal in our history and our success. As we proceeded to explain to Bill what we had in mind, he sat there stone-faced. I remember thinking that we were dead in the water because he did not like our idea. Then as we finished our presentation, Bill lit up and said, “OK. Here is how

we are going to do it.” I was stunned and surprised as he explained how we could raise the money and how we could revegetate the mountain.

As Bill told me later, he was actually stunned as the meeting progressed. As D&L Trail Manager, he was trying to figure out how there could be a sustainable fix of the biggest environmental problem

along the entire 165-mile length of the trail – the Palmerton Superfund site. Now he had an organization that came out of the blue proposing to help solve this problem. He quickly realized we were the partner he needed and went to work helping us succeed.

Bill told us about several grant programs, with the key one being the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) C2P2 grants program and introduced me to Dennis DeMara, the regional DCNR

representative. (There is a whole other story involved here for another time.) DCNR ended up supporting us with a \$250,000 grant to help with our land purchases. That grant gave others confidence to support us and, along with donations from individuals and businesses, other grants, and loans, we succeeded in raising the funds to purchase the land and establish Lehigh Gap Nature Center. Within two years, the loans were paid and we owned the land free and clear.

The other linchpin idea Bill shared that day in 2002 was the use of warm-season prairie grasses as the key to revegetating the barren mountainside. Bill took me out and showed me the grasses growing around the edges of our site and educated me about these amazing native species. He also introduced me to the warm season grass expert that would advise our re-vegetation efforts, John Dickerson of the U.S.



Isidore “Bill” Mineo in 2010

Department of Agriculture. John and Bill teamed up to lead the way in our planning for greening the mountain.

One of the first things Bill helped us do after we purchased the land was lead us in developing a master site plan that guided our development of the Nature Center. The plan included program and infrastructure blueprints for where we wanted the Nature Center to go. We achieved every one of the goals in that plan within the first six or seven years, including building our Osprey House visitor and education building.

Before becoming the D&L Trail Manager, Bill was the Director of Chester County Parks, where he had direct experience with grasses in Serpentine Barrens. Serpentine soils are high in naturally-occurring metals, and Bill reasoned that the grasses that grew there could tolerate the unnatural contamination at the Superfund site. He could not have been more correct, and with Dickerson's help, we designed the restoration plan in conjunction with U.S. EPA and the environmental engineers hired by the responsible party (CBS) to manage the revegetation of the site.

A favorite story of mine involved a meeting Bill attended with me, CBS, the zinc company officials, EPA, and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. The zinc company officials were skeptical about our methods and were throwing around some pretty heavy duty chemistry to try to intimidate us. I had been a chemistry major for a time and could follow along, but Bill shot back with even more complex chemistry knowledge, and the officials got quiet and stopped resisting. After the meeting I learned that Bill had a Ph.D. in chemistry and had worked for DuPont for a time. In his long career with three retirements, he also managed Northampton County Parks. Just before Bill retired from the D&L Corridor, I called him and invited him to join our Board



Mineo at the Osprey House dedication in 2010

of Directors. To my delight, he accepted and has been a vital Board member since 2008.

Bill and his wife Lorraine live in Williams Township, south of Easton, PA, where they own a small farm. Lorraine, a botanist, and Bill love growing heirloom vegetables, and after he retired from the D&L, he and Lorraine took on the challenge of revitalizing the farmers' market in Easton. Early on, Bill invited me to his farm on several occasions to teach me about the warm season grasses he was growing.



LGNC Director Dan Kunkle presents Bill (right) with a Friend of the Lehigh Gap Nature Center award in 2006.

We thank Bill for all his sage advice and for sharing his experience and expertise with us at Lehigh Gap Nature Center. He offers as much insight in Board matters as he has in fundraising and conservation matters through the years since the birth of our Nature Center in 2002. 🐻