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Hoosier Hero

Explore! For most people, this word conjures visions of dark African jungles or freezing treks to Antarctica, but for me, memories of my father spring forth as he and I, along with a trail of neighborhood kids scouted Indiana woodlands. My dad, Greg Wingstrom, dedicates his life to protecting and loving the environment and is my Hoosier Hero nominee for 2009.

I remember that Dad used to pick me up from preschool and say enthusiastically, “Hey Bug, it’s a beautiful day so let’s go explore!” Sometimes we would hike in a nature preserve catching frogs, salamanders, insects, mice, or whatever else we could find. He taught me how to hold these delicate creatures without hurting them, and he taught me about their lives, habitats, and interconnections to other animals and plants that began my love for science and biology. Even if we brought something home so I could show my not-always-thrilled mom, we always had to return the critter to its home. It was also during this time that I first started to see my dad as a biologist and learn his philosophy on life: Treat others as you want to be treated and always ask yourself “are your actions worth the consequences?”

Growing up on Pine Lake in Laporte, Indiana my dad was always either in the woods or on the lake developing his love of nature. My dad’s lifelong love of nature and the outdoors inevitably led to a biology degree with a chemistry minor from Valparaiso

University and to his career as an Environmental Scientist with the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) since 1970. Dad inspects companies throughout Indiana that emit air pollutants to ensure that they comply with state and federal regulations. Dad is the ozone expert for the state of Indiana for IDEM. Ozone is a pollutant that is harmful to plants, animals, and humans. During his career, Dad has received environmental impact awards, and he is a nationally recognized expert on the fiberglass industry. Manufacturing fiberglass products, such as boats, truck caps, and recreational vehicles, release styrene into the air. Styrene is a very toxic chemical and in 2000, Indiana had the greatest styrene emissions in the country! My dad worked with industry representatives to write a regulation that reduced styrene emissions by over fifty percent! Three years later, EPA adopted a similar law to reduce styrene emissions nationwide. The public generally only knows that we do have pollutants in the air, but little is known about steps that are taken to protect them. Dad's knowledge, analytical background, and expertise were key factors in the development of this Indiana law: 326 IAC 20-25.

Dad also recently wrote an Indiana guide for small businesses that do painting for the state of Indiana, which will soon be implemented. It provides them with guidance on Indiana environmental laws and permits to help them achieve compliance with Indiana state law. His philosophy to "treat others as you want to be treated" carries over

into this as Dad very much wants small businesses to be compliant with laws and continue to operate without state fines in this suffering economy.

Dad's expertise has also made him a popular speaker at environmental seminars and resulted in numerous job offers from industry and environmental consulting firms. Though he could have nearly doubled his salary, Dad always politely refuses the job offers because he feels he can do more good for the environment working for IDEM.

Dad also carries his love of nature to his service in the community. As former president and vice president of the Dallas Bay Association, Dad developed and implemented a weed control program to control invasive weed species for the benefit of natural aquatic plants and animals. This is an ongoing program for Dallas Lake and their homeowners. Water quality is also important to the environment, and as a Dallas Lake Association member, Dad helped with raising funds to implement a water quality test for Dallas Lake. He also organized and participated in river cleanouts to eliminate flooding for homeowners. He has also been an avid participant at LaGrange Parks, The Nature Conservancy, and ACRES to eliminate invasive plant species such as Garlic Mustard and Purple Loosestrife.

My dad has made our neighborhood safer and more pleasant by using natural mosquito control and by eliminating mosquito breeding sites so that homeowners can dispense with pesticide usage. He became interested in mosquitoes while in college and while working at the LaPorte and Porter County Health Departments. He has used

his knowledge to keep our community free of mosquitoes in the summertime, thus protecting us from the diseases mosquitoes carry such as encephalitis and West Nile disease. It also makes our evenings outside more pleasant. He not only does this for our neighborhood but also at a local horse stable, and anywhere else upon request.

Dad has such a love for the lake, another natural resource. He has installed and maintained a slalom water ski course on Dallas Lake that provides hours of exercise and entertainment for the Dallas Lake community. He gives freely of his time as he gives skiing lessons to local neighborhood children.

Dad served on the LaGrange County Community Foundation for several years where he developed a personal manual that they still use today. This personal manual includes job descriptions and job responsibilities.

My dad has always been very involved with nature outside of his work. He has been a judge for science fair at local schools and regional competitions, and he's always quick to help someone rescue an animal. He has even been called by a neighbor to come get a snake off their back porch that was making a peculiar rattling noise, a rattlesnake! Along with this one, Dad has also captured and moved several Eastern Massasauga rattlesnakes to nature preserves, teaching others that these are endangered species. If the neighbors had killed this endangered snake, they could have faced consequences such as a fine because the snake wasn't trying to harm them; it was sending a warning because it was afraid. During the time he had the

snake, I, along with the neighborhood, learned a new appreciation and respect for this rattlesnake as Dad taught everyone it is only a living creatures trying to survive.

Another time when Dad was on a school fieldtrip with my sister at a nature preserve, he found a water snake. The guide, who obviously didn't like snakes, started telling the students how aggressive and dangerous they are toward humans. Dad just waded into the water and caught the snake. He spent a few minutes telling the kids about it as he calmed it down through gentle handling. All the kids were able to hold the snake and learn about these interesting creatures.

Dad loves teaching people about different animals such as bats, raccoons, mice, and snakes. In elementary school, he used to bring in these small animals that he caught or rescued. He did this to teach the students that there is no need to fear or harm animals.

Because he has impacted Indiana's environment at the state and local level, my dad deserves to be recognized as a 2009 Indiana Hoosier Hero. His lifelong dedication to nature and the environment has made an impression on the people around him, me especially. When I pack up to leave for college this August to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse, I will also take with me the things my dad taught me: A love for nature and respect for others and the environment.