

“AMERICAN GARDEN”

Selu Nurtures Caretakers' Love of the Land



By Don Bowman

Photos by Lora Gordon

If a place can speak, then the 380-acre Selu Conservancy came through loud and clear to Will '15 and Lindsay Dowd '13. The Dowds have made their mark on this slice of paradise. After Will's graduation from Radford University, they embark on their future beyond Selu. However, they say the property will always be a part of their life and accomplishments.

“Selu is so beautiful and has so much potential. It is a laboratory, a classroom, a recreation site, a habitat and a haven,” said Will, a May 2015 geospatial sciences graduate. “I have been fortunate. I feel like I know every tree.”

Reporting to Jeff Armistead who was director of Selu Conservancy during their tenure, the Dowds served as on-site-caretakers and champions for Selu.

“Will and Lindsay's contributions, advocacy, leadership and enthusiasm have been invaluable,” he said.

The path by which the Dowds arrived at Radford University and Selu is one navigated by curiosity — not convention.

As middle-schoolers, they met at a summer camp and became buddies. Unhappy with the high school experience and life in Smithfield, Virginia, Will gassed up his Jeep “to look for America,” as Simon and Garfunkel once sang. An early stop on Will's journey of discovery was to see his pal, Lindsay, in Atlanta.

She invited herself along on an adventure that included national parks, back roads and small towns. In the process, a friendship blossomed into a romance, and they married in 2010.

A chance encounter in Arizona with a traveling nurse crystallized Lindsay's interest in pursuing her nursing degree and a nursing career. She received her associate's degree at Virginia Western Community College and her bachelor's degree in nursing at Radford University. She has worked in the post-neurological trauma unit and now is a member of her hospital's research committee.

She is excited about an upcoming project that will brighten the walls of the hospital. Her research project about the positive impact of art on healing led her to propose and champion a project by which Lewis Gale Montgomery and the Radford University College of Visual and Performing Arts would combine to feature student-generated art in the hospital environment.

With their experiences, education and enthusiasm, the Dowds have invested heavily in their part-time job at Selu. “From the time we met as teenagers, we knew we were looking

“Here at Radford University and at Selu, we found a place and a community that inspires us and has brought out our best.”

Lindsay Dowd '13



Will '15 and Lindsay '13 Dowd listen during the gardening workshop they hosted this spring at SELU as Jason Pall of Glade Road Growing, Blacksburg, explains the proper way to irrigate a garden.

for something we hadn't found. Here at RU and at Selu, we found a place and a community that inspires us and has brought out our best,” said Lindsey.

“Nursing done well is demanding. It can be hard on a person's spirit. Here at Selu, I have found a way to make it work,” she said. “I can give my patients my all, and Selu restores me and inspires me.”

Officially, Will was the caretaker of the conservancy that lies along the Little River, 20 minutes from campus. During their two-year tenure at Selu, the Dowds invested sweat equity into its physical resources and added promotion and academic outreach to the caretaker's role.

Typical of their passionate evangelism for Selu, the Dowds began two grassroots initiatives in support of the conservancy's 25th anniversary: the formation of the Selu Garden and Service Club and its subsequent garden project. RU students and friends built, planted and harvested a 100-foot by 60-foot, 10-bed garden to generate produce for area fresh food pantries and club members.



Courtesy photo

Photo, upper right: Participants in the SELU Gardening Workshop look through free seed packets brought in by one of the gardening groups that presented at the workshop. The seeds were free to gardeners who plan to garden at SELU this summer.

“There are many examples of outstanding undergraduate and graduate research happening at Selu.”

President Penelope W. Kyle

The club's first effort, which began with seeds donated by the New River Valley Chapter of the Virginia Master Gardeners, culminated with a fall harvest of more than 100 pounds of Selu-grown produce. Corn, tomatoes, squash, zucchini, cucumbers, green beans, eggplant, watermelon, cantaloupe, rosemary, thyme, sage and lavender were donated by the group to the Radford-Fairlawn Daily Bread and the Meals-On-Wheels program. For its 2015 garden, plans are just as ambitious.

At Homecoming 2014, the Friends of Selu hosted a 25th Anniversary Celebration at which President Penelope W. Kyle detailed the academic value of this unique place for RU students and programs. President Kyle recounted some of the research assets that Selu provides: an aviary, a teaching and research reptile collection, an observatory and The Farm at Selu, which gives visitors a glimpse of farming life in the 1930s through guided tours, interactive demonstrations and exhibits.

“There are many examples of outstanding undergraduate and graduate research happening at Selu,” she said. “I need to stress, this undergraduate research, in many cases, is graduate-caliber research. Because of this property, our students gain experience that makes them stand out from the rest when they apply for their first job or for graduate school.”

John Bowles, who donated the initial 185-acre tract of his family's ancestral land to found Selu, was also in attendance at the celebration.

In the last two semesters, ten different research projects have been conducted from a variety of disciplines including interior design and recreation, parks and tourism.

As they reflected on their rich and varied RU experience, the Dowds were unanimous in giving thanks.

“As a nurse, RU allowed me the flexibility to tailor my education and development with research experience,” she said.

Will marveled at the positive changes he has undergone.

“Radford University brought out more in me than I imagined possible. I have had opportunity after opportunity since I got here and have grown so much,” he said. ■

