Prairie Passion Earns Irvine 2022 Iowa Conservation Woman of the Year

by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist
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Like many widowed farmwives, Cathy Irvine of rural Dysart was overwhelmed with what to do with her farm after the death of her husband, David, in 2016. After considering what he would have wanted and their shared passion, Irvine donated 77 acres of her 460-acre farm to be restored to native prairie.

Irvine's generosity and commitment to creating wildlife habitat contributed to her being named the 2022 Iowa Conservation Woman of the Year, as voted by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Federal Women's Program Committee.

Dr. Laura Jackson, Director of the Tallgrass Prairie Center and Professor of Biology at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), and the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) nominated Irvine – a retired special education teacher for the Waterloo Community Schools.

Cathy and her late husband moved to David's family farm after graduate school and built a log cabin home there in 1978. She admits she wasn't very involved in farming decisions while her husband was alive. “I made no decisions about the farm. I nodded my head and smiled when I was told what was going on,” said Irvine. “When David died, I wondered, ‘now what’?”

Irvine says her tenant farmer, Brian Pippert, was very helpful through the first year. “I have wonderful renters,” she said. “Brian was very supportive when I decided to get the prairie going. He said, ‘I'm all in!’”

A Passion for Prairie
Cathy and David shared a passion for Iowa's native prairie. For example, they read John Madson's “Where the Sky Began” together and made trips to the Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge in Prairie City.

Irvine said she wanted to do something to keep David's presence on the farm. “Prairie was one of our fascinations,” she said. “It just seemed like a natural fit that some of what David had stay as farmland and parts would revert to prairie.”

It was Dr. Jackson who Irvine first contacted about donating land to create a prairie on her farm. “It was a complete surprise,” said Jackson. “Never in our wildest dreams could we imagine that someone would offer us this land to restore prairie on, plus the resources to do it. It has so many benefits to UNI and the Tallgrass Prairie Center.”

Jackson says she was impressed with the habitat Cathy had already established around her home. “Cathy has participated in ‘citizen science’ efforts to understand the migration of the monarch butterfly,” she said. “The grove of black walnuts and other trees surrounding her house is a haven for the monarchs as they migrate each fall. Her extensive flower beds, vegetable garden and beehives contribute to the beauty of the acreage.”

Prairie Restoration
Given the high value of the farmland, Dr. Jackson recommended Irvine work with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) – a nonprofit land trust that rou-
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INHF has permanently protected more than 185,000 Iowa land acres since 1979 on over 1,300 sites in nearly every county. Irvine gifted the 77 acres to the UNI Foundation after INHF established a permanent conservation easement on it.

The Tallgrass Prairie Center began restoring the prairie in 2018 and will continue the long-term management of what is now called Irvine Prairie. Justin Meissen, Research and Restoration Program Manager for the Tallgrass Prairie Center, separated the piece of ground into five sections – developing a new seeding every year.

“We primarily focused on establishing highly diverse tallgrass prairie plant communities from seed,” said Meissen. “So far, we have restored over 120 plant species native to eastern Iowa. We’ve already confirmed more than 70 of those are present on-site.”

Meissen said they used soil maps and topography to tailor seed mixes to distinct plant communities, including wet and mesic tallgrass prairie areas. “We are also using live plants grown at the Tallgrass Prairie Center to establish populations of difficult to seed or commercially unavailable species,” he said.

Irvine mows the parking area and the firebreaks and has collected native plant seeds in the roadside ditch to be grown in the Tallgrass Prairie Center greenhouse. “Basically, she has been an incredible partner in this process,” said Jackson.

Despite losing rented farm acres, Jackson says Pippert has been helpful and cooperative in the whole process. “Brian mowed the first-year plantings and helped create the parking area,” she said.

**Educational Component**

Irvine says her goal for the prairie, which is open to the public, is to be educational. “Having the university involved with the research and students being a part of it – even at the high school and elementary levels – is a natural fit for me,” she said.

UNI students are involved in the restoration and management of Irvine Prairie, which includes prairie burns, preparing custom seed mixes, and transplanting each year. “They help monitor the vegetation as it grows and provide feedback on the condition of the prairie,” Jackson said.

The original section of Irvine Prairie seeded in 2018 is established and flourishing in August 2022.
develops and assist with weed control,” said Jackson. “We have also had students conduct undergraduate research on the site under the direction of UNI biology faculty.

“The Restoration Ecology class studies data from Irvine Prairie, and we take fieldtrips there. As the site develops and matures, we expect more UNI students to get involved. It is also available to other high school, college or university students who wish to study there.”

**Other Projects**

Inspired by the Guido Van Helton Silo Murals in Fort Dodge, Irvine put a tallgrass prairie mural on the 60-foot silo that sits on her farmstead. She contacted Dysart-native Adam Eikamp – now of Dubuque – to paint the mural.

“I didn’t know Adam before this but was told he would be the perfect person to paint it since he is from Dysart,” said Cathy. “I told him I wanted some native prairie on it, but he far exceeded my expectations. He really did his research.”

The mural, which can be seen by nearly every vantage point from the Irvine Prairie, includes a large monarch butterfly, the State Tree of Iowa (Bur Oak), the State Flower of Iowa (Prairie Rose), and the State Bird of Iowa (American Goldfinch).

Earlier this year, Irvine donated a wooded, 2-acre parcel of land to the city of Dysart for the creation of the Viola Irvine Nature Preserve. She has been working with the city’s tree board to clean it up and develop a trail for public access.

Irvine recently announced she would donate an additional 220 acres to the UNI Foundation, to be restored and managed by the Tallgrass Prairie Center. The INHF will once again establish a conservation easement on the property. “It has been a joy to work with Cathy to pursue our common vision of a place where people can come to see what Iowa once looked like, prior to European settlement,” said Jackson. “We are learning something new every year and enjoy how the prairie changes constantly.”

To read more about Irvine Prairie, visit tallgrassprairiecenter.org/irvine-prairie. To nominate a deserving candidate for Iowa Conservation Woman of the Year, visit cdiowa.org/recognition/awards/.

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