

Ever Green!

By Jennifer Delahunty Britz

Last spring, Christian Breczinski, OSB, a monk of Saint John's Abbey and a 1998 graduate of Saint John's University, joined his classmates for an annual ritual: tree planting. They headed out into the woods with shovels, gloves and buckets of saplings. Their charge was to plant a barrier of northern white cedar between Interstate 94 and the northern perimeter of the 2,400 acres that Saint John's Abbey and University call home.

Tree planting is both a tradition and a powerful symbol at Saint John's.

Since joining the monastery, Br. Christian, who works in the Saint John's Arboretum, has spent much of his time in the woods and prairies with visitors and his fellow monks. When he strolls through the woods with his older confreres, they often point to a towering white pine and tell him, "I planted that tree during my novitiate." Last spring, Br. Christian performed the same ritual. "I can imagine how these cedars will look in 20 or 30 years, but I know I won't live long enough to see them fully mature and that's okay," he reflects. "Someone else *will* see them and enjoy it. That gives me a sense of peace."

Br. Christian's sense of peace stems from the 1,500-year Benedictine tradition of stewardship and a commitment to sustainability of the environment. "The Rule of Benedict speaks about how the tools and goods of the monastery should be cared for, and we extend this teaching to the land and the buildings," says Br. Christian. "We are instructed to take care of everything so it is here for the generations who will follow."

Across campus, in a classroom on the second floor of the Quad, a group of students in environmental historian Derek Larson's class are learning what happens when future generations are *not* considered. When asked if they can guess the location of the nearest superfund site—those areas of the country so polluted they are uninhabitable—his students are stymied. "They all think those sites lie somewhere 'out there,' in New Jersey or someplace," observes Larson, who heads the CSB/SJU environmental studies program. He asks them if they've been to the mall in St. Cloud. Most of them have. "I tell them there's a significant superfund site across the road where an old railroad yard once stood. They look out across the beautiful woods and lakes and realize that is just a dozen miles from campus. They are horrified at the thought."

The contrast between caring for the environment for future generations and *not* caring for it ... this is just one of the many important lessons that come to life at Saint John's University.

Benedictine Environmental Stewardship —
A Way of Living *and* a Way of Learning



The Place Leads to the Program

On this campus of woodlands and lakes, three remarkable forces—Benedictine-style stewardship, environmental education and a remarkable natural learning laboratory—coalesce to form one of the most effective and innovative environmental studies programs in the country.

“We are among 2 to 3 percent of programs in the country with an interdisciplinary focus,” says Economics Professor Ernie Diedrich, a program co-founder. “We combine theology, humanities/social sciences and the natural sciences—it’s a kind of three-layer cake that creates very capable policy makers. Plus we have one heck of a setting.”

Anyone who has passed through the Pine Curtain knows precisely what Diedrich means. This setting, this place—one of the most picturesque and unspoiled spots in the Upper Midwest—has been the sacred and sustaining home to the Benedictines since 1856.

wheat and rye, which they ground in their own gristmill to make the original “Johnnie Bread.” Up through the 1950s, the monks provided for themselves and for their students by growing all their own vegetables, milking their own dairy cows, harvesting honey, tapping maple sugar trees, milling lumber, even experimenting with horticulture. At one time more than 100 pear and apple tree species were grown on Abbey lands.

Though it became economically inefficient by the 1950s to raise all the food for the abbey and university, several remnant sustainability practices are embedded into Collegeville life. Every spring, monks, faculty and students join together to tap hundreds of maple trees. Brothers still tend a small orchard. And today Br. Gregory Eibensteiner, OSB, and his assistants continue to build the desks, chairs and other pieces of red oak furniture that reside in university buildings and alumni homes. “God doesn’t make junk and neither should monastic communities made in God’s image,” writes

*“Everything you need to teach environmental studies —
wetlands, lakes, streams, forest, prairie —
is right outside our door.”*

When Abbot Boniface Wimmer, OSB, dispatched four monks from St. Vincent’s Abbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, to establish a Benedictine presence in the Minnesota territory, they had tree seeds in their pockets. They planted the swayed pines (mostly scotch pines) that welcome every campus visitor. And for almost 150 years, the Benedictines have maintained this forest and the land surrounding the abbey.

Self-sufficiency is woven into the history of the Benedictines who settled in Central Minnesota. They built their first structure from fieldstone gathered from nearby hillsides. When they began building the first church in 1879, they ran their own brickyard round the clock for months on end, producing 15,000 bricks a day from clay found on site. They dammed Watab Creek to run their own water-powered sawmill. After clearing some land, they raised

Abbot John Klassen in a paper on environmental stewardship.

Indeed, the sacred and the sustainable come together in many of the Benedictine’s practices. “We have the advantage of being supported by our spiritual beliefs, which tell us to care for the earth,” says S. Phyllis Plantenberg, OSB, an emeritus professor of biology and one of the co-founders of the environmental studies program. “The earth is a gift from God, and its care is a matter of justice.”

With that foundation, it’s no surprise that a strong environmental studies program has grown and flourished at CSB and SJU.

The program was born in the late 1980s while Ernie Diedrich and S. Phyllis were returning from a campus sustainability conference with the late Fr. Paul Schwietz, OSB, the Abbey’s land manager. “We had heard all these compelling reasons for revamping



Brothers George Primus (L), Charles Kirchner (C) and Julius Beckermann (R) harvest apples in the monastery orchard.

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Brother Raphael Olson, OSB, baking bread. >>



A Benedictine Legacy of Self-

our campuses to be more sustainable and to raise the level of awareness of environmental issues, and so we had to ask ourselves 'Are we actually going to do something?' That answer had to be 'yes,'" recalls Diedrich.

A coalition of faculty formed the Environmental Coordinating Organization to examine campus energy and recycling practices and to begin the process of building an environmental studies curriculum. About that same time, Fr. Paul began the 150-acre Habitat Restoration Project—a project that raised visibility of environmental stewardship, gave students and faculty a research focus, and became the basis for the land's designation as a natural arboretum 10 years later. By 1994, a minor in environmental studies was in place, and more than 45 students have completed that program to date.

From Minor to Major

Today, about 60 students are pursuing an environmental studies minor. "Environmental studies used to be a quiet little backwater," says program director Larson. "Not any more. There's been a genesis—more faculty, more students, more resources and more people realize the uniqueness of our opportunities here. The idea for a major has been around for 10 years. It's just now reached a critical mass."

Last October, the faculty overwhelmingly approved an environmental studies major with uncharacteristic shouts of "Yea!" to register their enthusiastic approval of the program. The Board of Regents gave final approval for the major in December.

Now students clamoring for the opportunity to marry their beliefs with their studies will be able to do so. Unlike most college programs that focus on environmental science, the CSB/SJU program is designed to produce graduates who will be able to make a difference in environmental policy. But that doesn't mean the program is short on science; in fact, the first course in the program is a two-semester science sequence.

"We give students a solid foundation in geology, biology and chemistry so that they can evaluate policy decisions from a scientific perspective," says Chemistry Professor Mike Ross, one of several faculty members responsible for the science component of the program. Ross and his colleagues have literally written the book



John Geissler '99, the Arboretum's assistant director, teaches local school children that wetlands are more than just water.

on an integrated approach. "No textbooks exist that teach the subject the way we want to teach it," he says. On the horizon are further curricular developments, including classes in environmental psychology and environmental sociology.

The faculty feels strongly about the rigor and promise of the program. "Our program has the potential to be one of the best in the U.S.," says Geology Professor Larry Davis. "It's not just that we have the right mix of disciplines, but also that we're situated in the most perfect place. Everything you need to teach environmental studies—wetlands, lakes, streams, forest, prairie—is right outside our door."



Samuel Judd, OSB, and Knute Anderson, OSB, at work in the cow barn

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Br. Dietrich Reinhart (L) and Br. Sean Sullivan (R) pick grapes in the abbey vineyards

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Sufficiency and Stewardship

“We Got to Get Dirty”

Brady Markell, a junior from Marshall, MN, is just one of the students poised to major in environmental studies. Like many students, he came to Saint John's with an interest in environmental issues but no real plans on how to integrate that into his studies. Then he joined the Environmental Studies Learning Community (ESLC) in the fall of 2001. Funded by the Bush Foundation, the ESLC provided an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in environmental issues for a semester. Seventeen students took the same four classes; the courses were team taught by biology, chemistry, economics, management and history/environmental studies faculty members. The students and faculty spent a month off campus conducting research at the Cloquet Forestry Center and the Lake Itasca Forestry and Biological Station. “The ESLC exposed us to real life situations—we got to get dirty. We looked at the economic impact of real projects,” recalls Markell, who is earning a second major in business.

Living the Questions

The “real world” is quite real to Amy Fredrigill, '97, who serves as a legislative correspondent on Iowa Senator Tom Harkin's agricultural committee. Fredrigill majored in economics and minored in environmental studies, worked for the Isaac Walton League upon graduation and then went on to earn a master's degree in public policy from George Washington University. As a staffer on the Senate's agricultural committee, she is balancing her own beliefs and ideas with the needs of the Senator's farming constituents. But it's a challenge for which the CSB/SJU environmental studies program prepared her well.

To complete her environmental studies minor, she chose a project dealing with solid waste at Saint John's “We dug through the garbage (which was disgusting!) and then analyzed it—what could be composted, what was recyclable and what should go into a landfill. I made recommendations—but I learned that solutions can take many years.” From that experience, she discovered the path she

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Central to the ESLC experience was a research project. Markell and his classmates designed an environmental studies building incorporating the most innovative ecological materials and practices. “Straw bales, composting toilets, fuel cell energy, recycled PVC pipe ... we included everything,” he says excitedly. The project helped Markell fulfill the class requirements *and* find a direction for his life. “I can see myself working with building companies as a buyer, helping them meet environmental regulations,” he says.

Fueled by that experience, Markell came back to campus and began an independent study project with Professor Diedrich, looking at the recycling possibilities for the campus. “Those experiences are preparing me for the real world,” says Markell.

wanted to follow to address environmental issues. “At CSB and SJU I learned that I wanted to work within the system to find sustainable solutions,” she testifies.

Working within the system is important to Ken Virnig '00 too. The Pierz, MN, native grew up milking Holsteins twice a day on the family farm. He earned a major in peace studies and a minor in environmental studies at Saint John's and has proceeded to Northwestern School of Law at Lewis & Clark in Portland, Oregon, the top environmental law program in the U.S. “I want to get an education that will help me protect the places I love,” says Virnig. His interest in the environment stems from his rural roots, from an internship with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agricul-



The Quadrangle in 1889. Saint John's brick-making kilns are located at the lower left portion of the photo.

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Br. John Anderl, OSB, taps a maple tree in 1949.

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A Benedictine Legacy of Self-

ture and from his interest in justice, which was fed by the Peace Studies program. “Why, for example, are landfills located in low-income communities? We need to answer these questions,” says Virnig.

Exploring the boundaries between environmental issues and other disciplines—economics, humanities, social science, natural science, philosophy and religion—excites Virnig. These disciplinary intersections are also where the heart of the CSB/SJU program lies. “To work for the Sierra Club or the Forest Service or any other organization, you really need a broad understanding of the issues,” says program director Larson. “We seek to graduate well-rounded, academically prepared students who have skills to fit in any number of places.”

Indeed, CSB/SJU graduates *do* fit a variety of niches—from creating organic topsoil out of waste (Eric Hansen '00, general manager, Mississippi Topsoils) to helping state and local governments purchase products that are better for the environment (Mike Liles '00, Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance). (See the profiles of graduates on pages 33-37 of this issue.)

Larson has created a broad vision for the program that he says rises organically, so to speak, out of the history and tradition of the universities. He'd like to create a permanent learning community model akin to the ELSC program, one that would include a plethora of outside-the-classroom activities. He'd also like to incorporate more service learning into the program and explore the possibility of a concentration in environmental education. But most of all, “I'd like us to become known as a place for the study of the nexus of religion and the environment.” Larson points to the strong scholars who are already teaching in that area; theologian Bernie Evans teaches a “Theology and the Environment Course” and philosopher Joe Desjardins teaches an “Environmental Ethics” course.

Larson's colleague, biologist Gordon Brown, agrees. “What we have at Saint John's that is entirely unique is the juxtaposition of a spiritual community and nature. You can go to lots of colleges and have an outdoor research experience—but where else can you go and watch people living the question, ‘Why should someone want to care for nature?’”



Dr. Derek Larson bud caps a white pine seedling during an Arboretum service learning project. To protect white pine from deer browsing, bud caps need to be applied to white pine every fall until the tree is at least five feet tall. This is done by placing a 4 by 6 inch sheet of paper around the terminal bud of the tree during the period of mid-September through October.

Protecting the Neighborhood

While alumna Fredrigill helps shape the nation's agricultural policies and alumnus Virnig gains the legal education he needs to protect the state he loves, back home in Collegeville, two graduates are helping to protect the natural learning lab and its environs.

Tim Haeg '94 didn't earn an environmental studies minor, but he paved the way for others to do so. “I was the guinea pig, patient zero—they tested the minor on me,” he says, laughing. Haeg, who



Br. Hubert Schneider, OSB, builds furniture in the woodworking shop.

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The saw mill and flour mill at the Watab dam were erected in 1878 and were burned to the ground on December 16, 1882.

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Sufficiency and Stewardship



grew up across the footbridge from the campus, came to Saint John's to study engineering. But then several of the biology faculty nabbed his imagination. "[Biology Professor] Nick Zakowski required us to know the Latin names of plants—*Acer Negundo*—box elder. My personal creed became '*Acer Negundo no more-o*,'" he quips.

Haeg helped with Fr. Paul's wetlands and prairie restoration projects and upon graduation joined a company that restores prairies. Then he was hired by the Stearns County Environmental Services department and began doing well and waste water testing. Today he owns his own company, Watab Diversified, which does water testing and other engineering, and has built a passive solar home on Fruit Farm Road on the edge of the campus. He has taken what he learned from Fr. Paul to convert a cornfield into a 15-acre blue stem prairie. "The wild turkeys love the native grasses," he says.

Growing up in the shadow of the bell banner, Haeg was greatly influenced by the Benedictines in seeing his place in the world. "We share a mutual respect for the land," he reflects. The monks come over every spring to help their neighbor burn his prairie. In turn, he buys their biosolids to fertilize his land. "It's a symbiotic thing—we see the benefit of one another," says Haeg.

Protecting the fringes of the campus is a hot topic these days in Collegeville. Richard Bresnahan, '76, SJU's artist-in-residence and director of the pottery program (see sidebar, page 14), who owns 120 acres within a few miles of campus, is active on area planning boards. "There are only 3,700 acres of red oak forest left in all of Stearns County," he says, noting that his and abbey lands form a good chunk of that acreage. He says that within that eco-corridor, there are nine endangered plant species and two endangered mammals; in addition, two species of birds are categorized as "special concern." He says curtly: "We get all bent out of shape about the Brazilian rain forest while ignoring our back yard."

Bresnahan is militant about defending the Saint John's neighborhood against development. "People want to be around any temple or sacred place," he observes. "The greatest fear is that in 25-30 years, Collegeville will turn into a high-density living environment."

The potter isn't the only one who's worried. "We don't want to be an island of green surrounded by golf courses, condos and mini-developments," says Arboretum Director and Land Manager Tom Kroll. "What's beyond these 2,400 acres really matters. We want to keep the ecological integrity intact."

To promote a healthy neighborhood, many faculty have turned their attention to projects near home. In 1995, S. Phyllis Plantenberg founded the Common Ground community garden, a sustainable, subscriber garden. She also co-founded the St. Joseph Farmers Market. In conjunction with economist Diedrich, Management

Land Manager and Arboretum Director Tom Kroll says that he couldn't possibly pick a favorite place on the 2,400 acres of woodlands, prairies and lakes that comprise the Saint John's Arboretum. He does, however, delight in certain aspects of the land: He watches closely for bloodroot in the spring, and in the winter, relishes how the snow catches on the windward side of the trees. "It's such a beautiful, healthy forest," Kroll exclaims.

“We want them to feel as if they can change the world.”

Professor Jamie Partridge wrote a manual of case studies of environmentally sound companies in Central Minnesota. Partridge and Arboretum staffers are leading the development of a new Geographical Information Systems lab so that students can use the software applications to map such things as local wetlands areas. Diedrich has his fingers in lots of local pies—a wind power project, garnering “Tree City” designation for St. Joseph, launching a sustainability float (from which students threw packets of wildflower seeds) for the St. Joseph Fourth of July parade ... the list of his endeavors goes on and on. Diedrich, who has inspired dozens of students to live responsibly and devote their lives to environmental issues, lives in an energy-efficient home and even drives a hybrid car.

Program director Larson says that future learning communities will focus on local issues. “We are rich in opportunities to make a difference right here,” he says.

Students Promote Campus Sustainability

The greening of the ivory tower—often called “campus sustainability”—is one way to make a *big* difference “right here,” to use Larson’s words. And several CSB/SJU students, with the encouragement and guidance of faculty, are leading that charge.

In the summer of 2001, Karolanne Hoffman, from Lacrosse, WI, and Paul Hansmeier, St. Cloud, MN, under the supervision of professors Diedrich and Partridge, began collecting baseline data for an environmental audit. That research project, funded by the National Council for Undergraduate Research and the Lancy Foundation, morphed into a campus-wide sustainability working group. “Everyone was thinking about sustainability, but we weren’t thinking together,” says Hoffman. CSB/SJU are one of only four schools in the nation to receive Lancy Foundation funding.

In recognition of her achievements related to sustainability, Hoffman won a coveted \$5,000 Udall Scholarship. Only 80 students nationwide receive that honor each year. Before she leaves campus and pursues a career in environmental issues or Native American affairs, Hoffman hopes to see a sustainability plan in place. “Not a covenant or a contract,” she qualifies, “but a commitment to a path of sustainability.”

Hoffman is surprised at her “change agent” status. “I didn’t have any idea that I would be this involved and have this much impact as a college student,” she says.

“That’s precisely the kind of experience we want to give students,” says Diedrich, who has championed sustainability on campus for nearly two decades. “We want them to feel as if they can change the world.”

An environmental audit of both campuses will be published in spring 2003.

The Rule Promotes Sustainability

Though the Rule of Benedict indicates nothing directly about environmental stewardship, it does offer three themes—humility, stability and frugality—“that can provide an ethical foundation for thinking about environmental stewardship,” writes Abbot John Klassen, in a paper titled “The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Stewardship.”

Humility allows us to recognize that “all life, human, botanical, and zoological, come *ha adamah*, ‘out of the ground,’” writes Klassen. Stability requires a commitment to a specific place—“by exploring, studying, seeing the place where one lives as a monastic will lead to a deep knowledge and love for the local environment,” he continues. And frugality is a counterbalance to our consumer-based society. “Neither should we buy junk, but rather goods that are durable, simple with a sense of design,” Klassen continues.

Geologist Larry Davis responds positively to the Rule’s universality and the practical framework it provides for environmental stewardship. “Wouldn’t it be great if entire countries would follow the Rule?” he asks.

Klassen says that the Abbey has been most successful in recycling buildings; at least a dozen structures on campus have been significantly renovated and preserved. He admits there is progress to be made at Saint John’s in reducing energy consumption and in recycling more waste.

After all, even Benedict in his Rule admonishes the abbot—not just once, but twice—not to be wasteful.

For more information about the Benedictine tradition of environmental stewardship, please read Fr. Alberic Culhane’s interview with Abbot John Klassen at www.csbsju.edu/sjumagazine/winter03/interview.html.



The late Fr. Paul Schwietz '76, OSB, founder of the Saint John’s Arboretum.

Research Opportunities Abound

As early as their first year, CSB/SJU students can taste environmental studies research.

Students in Mike Ross’s “Introduction to Environmental Studies” class take water samples from Lake Gemini to assess the influx of phosphates and nitrates into the Watab watershed. “By doing these kinds of experiments,” says Ross, “students are realizing that environmental research is not about quick answers.” They also come to realize that their personal choices—biodegrad-

Embodying Stewardship: Richard Bresnahan '76

In his lifestyle and in his art, artist-in-residence Richard Bresnahan embodies the Benedictine ethos of stewardship. His pottery studio, which has been running since 1979, is the only university program in the nation to fully integrate local and recycled resources with the artistic experience. Everything used in the pottery process—clay, glazes and even the fuel—comes from the surrounding area. The clay is extracted from



Richard Bresnahan '76, Saint John's artist in residence (Photo courtesy of James Dean)

an abandoned road bed at a nearby glacial ridge, and the glazes are created from local plant material—flax straw, navy bean straw, wheat straw, sunflower hulls, wood ash and pink quartzite dusts. Dead fall from the Saint John's woods and waste wood from local wood-product companies fuel Bresnahan's kiln. The Johanna kiln is located on the shores of Lake Watab and is the largest wood burning kiln in the U.S. Bresnahan's "Art and Sustainability" makes the link for students between how they live their lives and how they do their work—whatever that work may end up being. "There's artistic merit to every discipline," Bresnahan contends. Under his tutelage, students visit weavers, organic gardeners, sculptors, batik artists and potters in their mostly rural living/working settings. "There's this misunderstanding that art only happens in urban environments," he says. "I want students to realize that there are highly creative investigations happening in natural environments." Students spend 14 hours a day with Bresnahan, working in clay and exploring the integration of working, thinking, creating and spirituality against the backdrop of sustainability.

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Bresnahan's "Art and Sustainability" makes the link for students between how they live their lives and how they do their work—whatever that work may end up being. "There's artistic

able soap? recyclable containers?—have real world consequences.

Upper-division students have even more sophisticated research options. Gordon Brown took students on a paleoecology journey during last summer's Lancy research program. "It was a scary and fun research project," Brown recalls. "Scary because I learned everything I know about paleoecology a semester before I taught it. Fun because students felt they were a big part of the discovery process." Using special equipment, Brown and his research crew drilled down into Lake Hillary, a campus lake, and found 60 types of fossilized pollen grains from 12,000 years ago. This microscopic evidence proved that dramatic changes have taken place on the abbey's 2,400 acres in 120 centuries. Today's oak savanna was once a spruce savanna with widely scattered low vegetation such as sage. "That means the climate was once colder and drier here," he says. "Looking at the biological past teaches you that the way the land is today is relatively new and probably fairly temporary."

Brown relishes teaching and doing research using the Arboretum as his blackboard. Students in his general ecology class have done a survey of oak regeneration after a prescribed burn and an evaluation of the invasive wormwood sage plant in order to determine whether it's worth trying to eradicate. "Research isn't an abstract exercise here," says Brown. "Student research has real implications for the Arboretum, and that makes it more meaningful."

The Arboretum—the Ultimate Teaching Tool

While studying on sabbatical in Germany in the mid-1990s, Fr. Paul Schwietz, OSB, the abbey's land manager, encountered an "arboretum"—a Latin word the Germans use to describe a place where plants, especially trees, are grown for display and study. Fr. Paul had a moment of inspiration: Collegeville's Benedictines were doing a lot of good land management but not a lot of teaching with the campus's natural resources.

Fr. Paul died suddenly in 2000 at the age of 47, but not before seeing his dream come true. In 1997, all 2,400 acres of abbey land were designed as a natural Arboretum. "Fr. Paul felt the land could be a great teaching tool," says Kroll, a seasoned forester who took on the land manager mantle after Fr. Paul died.

Fr. Paul's devotion to the land has become the stuff of legend: He had been hard at work on the abbey land since 1988, planting 30,000 conifers and restoring three increasingly rare habitats—60 acres of wetlands, 50 acres of prairie and 40 acres of oak savanna. Through his artful land management practices and his focus on education, the aptly named "Padre of the Pines" set in motion an educational program that is today hitting its full stride.

John Geissler '99 is assistant director of the Arboretum and leads tours of more than 4,000 school-age children each year. Under his tutelage, students get a taste for field biology. Hands-on activities such as walking on the wetlands boardwalks and dipping for macroinvertebrates give them the opportunity to make their own discoveries. "I get them to identify the dragonfly nymphs and tadpoles themselves," he says. "They really get a kick out of it."

Like many students, Geissler became acquainted with the Arboretum by following Fr. Paul around as a student worker. One of

his first weeks on the job, Fr. Paul was doing a prescribed burn. He taught Geissler how to cut fire lines and do all the necessary preparation to contain the burn. “Then Fr. Paul handed me the torch,” remembers Geissler, “and he said, smiling, ‘Light it and don’t look back.’ I started the tinder and ran as fast as I could toward Fr. Paul—he was up high on a hill jumping up and down in delight.”

Geissler, and the rest of those who came to love the land through Fr. Paul, are carrying the torch of environmental education. Shannon Gilles, a senior from Rochester, MN, and Nathan Koewler, a senior from Clara City, MN, spent last summer creating “traveling trunks” for 4th and 5th graders to use for study before they tour the Arboretum. “The traveling trunks are designed to be a fun, interactive learning experience for the kids that will spark their imaginations and get them interested in nature,” says Gilles, whom Kroll describes as having “contagious enthusiasm” for teaching children about the natural world.

In the last year, the St. Cloud school district formalized an agreement that brings thousands of students to the Arboretum each year. Clearly, Fr. Paul’s vision for outreach and education is being realized.

Where Human and Natural History Meet

In 1894, a tornado whipped through the Saint John’s campus and knocked off a corner of the Quad and swept to the south and east, taking down trees on a point on Lake Sagatagan. The monks got busy in their nursery and grew some seedlings. By 1896, the monks reforested the point. “That stand of Norway spruce, scotch pine and white pine is the oldest known planting of trees in the state that isn’t in someone’s yard,” says Land Manager Kroll. “It’s just one more example of how natural history and human history come together at Saint John’s.”

That integration of natural and human history paid off in a big way in July of 2002. The SmartWood Program of the Rainforest Alliance announced that the abbey’s forestland had received the Forest Stewardship Council’s certification for responsible management of its forestlands. “The Benedictine’s balanced approach to life carries over directly into the management of their forests,” commented David Bubser, SmartWood Northern U.S. Regional Manager. To date, 453 forests in 56 countries have received this certification following a strict audit. In addition, the Department of Natural Resources mapped the Abbey lands and declared them an example of an intact, functioning oak forest.

“The monks have cared for these woods with great intention,” says Kroll. Though the woods were heavily used, they have been sustained through management. “That’s what you like to see as a forester,” he says, “that the land is well taken care of for future generations. This land is a perfect example of what good land management can mean.”

Kroll says that the forest grows by about 120,000 board feet a year, of which only 40,000-60,000 board feet is harvested. The majority of the harvested wood is taken to nearby Amish sawyers who cut it in their labor-intensive mills. The red oak becomes furniture. The pine boards become coffins.



Brady Markell, a junior management major from Marshall, MN, bud caps a white pine seedling while working on a service learning project in the Arboretum.

It seems only fitting—a sustainable circle, of sorts—that the Benedictine monks of Saint John’s Abbey are buried in coffins they built from the trees that their forefathers planted.

Jennifer Delahunty Britz worked at SJU from 1982-1989. She writes about higher education and edits “The Lawlor Review,” an education marketing journal.