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March 26, 2009

Nature Center fundraising under way

By Cynthia Broome
Special to The Clinton News



Photos by Melanie Thortis | The Clinton News

Joshua and Beth Welch with The Froghead Grill in Clinton and Jerry Walls, director of the Clinton Community Nature Center, are partnering together to help raise money for the nonprofit Nature Center. The Froghead Grill is selling T-shirts with a portion of the proceeds going to the Nature Center. See more photos at www.clintonnews.com

DETAILS

- The Clinton Community Nature Center is located at 617 Dunton Road near Olde Towne Clinton.
- Membership levels range from \$5 for students up to \$1,000 for corporate silver sponsors.
- For more information about helping the Nature Center meet its fundraising challenge, visit www.clintonnaturecenter.org or call (601) 926-1104.

Welch devised a special partnership logo which he added to the left sleeve of all the \$14 T-shirts sold at the restaurant.

"Every shirt we sell from now on will have the logo, and \$3 of the proceeds will go directly to the Nature Center," said Welch. "We will also be doing other things to promote and support the center, like assisting with events and sponsoring a hole at the upcoming golf tournament."

Welch hopes other individuals and businesses will follow his lead and partner with the Nature Center. "We need all the support we can get," he said.

The biggest boost yet in the Nature Center's efforts to survive has come from Mississippi College President Lee Royce. MC will match any new funds raised until May 31, up to a maximum match of \$7,500.

"Mississippi College alumni, faculty and staff have been actively engaged in the work of the Clinton Nature Center from its inception," Royce said. "The center remains a vital asset for the Clinton community, and we all need to help ensure its long term success."

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When Clinton Community Nature Center director Jerry Walls stepped into his job several months ago, he knew he would be facing an uphill battle in a tough economy to keep the nonprofit 32-acre forest and outdoor classroom afloat.

"The Nature Center had been going from one fundraising event to another, just barely meeting expenses," Walls said. "We had only 2 1/2 months to survive."

"Not only do we want to survive, we want to take the center to the next level and build for the future."

Two new fundraising partnerships - one with Mississippi College and another with the locally owned Froghead Grill - are giving the Nature Center a boost in that direction.

"Our biggest challenge is to get more involved with the community and get the community more involved with us," Walls said. "People did not know we were hurting as bad as we were."

Walls began to look for ways to increase support for the center at the same time Froghead Grill owner and nature buff Josh Welch was looking for a way to give back to the community.

"Josh was like a frog who jumped out of the woods and kind of latched on to us," Walls said. "He approached us on his own volition and initiative, because he believes in our mission to educate people and provide a place where they can learn about the natural world."

"I thought our (restaurant decoration) frogs tied into the nature theme really well, so I became engaged in two facets," Welch said.

"I joined the Nature Center board and began a partnership with the center to provide an ongoing means of support."



Melanie Thortis | The Clinton News

Walking trails and wildlife are abundant in the 33-acre Clinton Community Nature Center.

"We are open to anything, from new and upgraded memberships to sponsorships, donations and grants," Walls said. "Everybody that becomes a sponsor will be recognized on our Web site and in our newsletter."

A number of local businesses have already joined the Froghead Grill as sponsors, including BankPlus, Mascagni and Co., Mississippi Discount Drugs, Neil King State Farm Insurance, Nucor and Revell Hardware.

The center also benefits from numerous volunteers, such as National Junior Honor Society students from Sumner Hill Junior High who volunteer at the center's annual Nature Day.

"The group has helped us on numerous occasions in the past as part of their volunteer service hours," Walls said. "Those kids do a great job."

"We had a group working at a recent plant sale," said Sumner Hill teacher and honor society sponsor Mamie Lilley. "None of the 12 volunteers had ever been to the Nature Center before, and some did not even know Clinton had a Nature Center. Now they are all dying to go back."

"It is important that our students know what is available in our community and that they get involved," she said. "When they are involved as young people, they will come to love the center and we will know we are leaving it in good hands."

The Nature Center is a resource for all ages, Walls said.

"We want to be partners, not just recipients," he said. "We want to interact with the community by providing unique educational and recreational opportunities."

"The Wednesday of spring break (March 18) was a record day for us," Walls said. "We had 102 people visit the center. Granted, it was spring break and the weather was great, but we had nothing special on the program. People just came out to walk the trails and enjoy nature."

"We get people from Vicksburg all the time, almost every day," he said. "We want people from Clinton and throughout the metro area to come take advantage of what we have to offer."

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