



Sid McKnight (left) and John and Joan Strickler (right)

## Remembering Sid McKnight & John Strickler

The Kansas state director honors two friends and conservationists

Here at The Nature Conservancy, we're mourning the recent passing of two good friends and trustees: Sid McKnight and John Strickler.

Appropriately, it was a bluebird summer day when first met Sid McKnight. We were standing in waist-high grass on TNC's Anderson County Prairies preserve, puzzling over horrid little invading sericea lespedeza plants. Sid, both a doctor of dentistry and a biologist, greeted me with his trademark wide smile, contagious enthusiasm, true humility and deep thinking about conservation. His personality was as bright as the day's blue sky. He quickly became a treasured friend.

Sid thought that basic human ethics mandated everyone do their part to conserve nature's richness. He believed

in, and lived out, the idea that stewarding wild places and nature's assets was a fundamental part of contributing to the well-being of fellow human beings. On that day in Anderson County, and on every other day I spent with Sid, I learned from him.

**I am soul-satisfied that we could not be doing any more important work and enduring work.**

*Dr. Sid McKnight Jr., Trustee*

Sid and his wife Carole put their time and money to work in pursuit of their ideals. A 20-year trustee of The Nature Conservancy in Kansas, Sid rarely missed a board meeting. Even when in poor health, he was faithful to join the discussions by conference call.

Sid, Carole and their bird dogs spent much of their time at their rural home in Anderson County, where they had restored the native prairie ecosystem on about 500 acres. I visited him there many times. We told stories and discussed invasive plants, conservation finance, music (Sid was a drummer and I am a guitarist), wildflowers and our children—so much about the legacy of wildness they might inherit.

I always read between the lines as Sid spoke that he was driven, as a conservationist and philanthropist, primarily by concern for what sort of natural world our kids and grandkids might inherit from us. That concern was so deep that Sid said his work as a volunteer leader of TNC was a "second career."

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Trustees Bill Lyons and Sid McKnight in the Red Hills of Kansas in 2012 © Ruth Sawin/TNC; Founding trustees John Strickler, Wayne Lebsack and Kenny Baum celebrating TNC's 10-year anniversary in Kansas in 1999 © TNC

## NATURE KANSAS

### Veterans' Next Mission: Sustainable Agriculture

With help from The Nature Conservancy, a veteran-led nonprofit, Servicemember Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE), has secured its future and is now the proud owner of a 308-acre farm northwest of Manhattan, Kansas.

SAVE Farm was established in 2015 as a pathway to farming for veterans and servicemembers by providing agricultural training and medical assistance to men and women who are transitioning from the military to civilian life. The program offers students an opportunity to learn firsthand about managing cropland, livestock, orchards, horticulture and bees.

SAVE had been leasing their farm, and when the opportunity to purchase the property presented itself, TNC and The Conservation Fund stepped up to provide low-cost loans for the acquisition.

To date, SAVE has trained more than 500 veterans, and over 90 percent of them have gone on to either farm themselves or find jobs elsewhere in the agri-business sector.

"It's SAVE's hope, and our hope, that this model will be replicated at all land grant universities," says Dr. Heidi Mehl, director of water and agriculture programs for TNC in Kansas. "Eventually, thousands of SAVE farmers will be using best conservation practices right from the beginning of their careers. Things like no-till, cover crops, diversification, grazing for wildlife, managing for pollinators—they aren't an afterthought, but rather deeply integrated into how SAVE teaches farming."

For more information, visit [nature.org/savefarm](http://nature.org/savefarm).

*(continued from front)* Above all else, Sid was my friend. He believed in TNC's work and in the people who carry out that work. He said many things that have shaped me for the better, but one of my favorite Sid McKnight quotes is: "When I stand on a hilltop in Flint Hills, seeing nothing but grass and sky and hearing nothing but wind in the grass, I am soul-satisfied that we could not be doing any more important and enduring work."

I first met John Strickler more than 30 years ago. He was in a league of his own as a conservationist and I recall several pivotal conversations with him. The most vivid one happened in the spring of 1995. He sat next to my desk in the Kansas Wildlife & Parks Operations Headquarters and informed me that the governor had asked him to serve as interim Secretary of the Department and that he wanted me to serve as Assistant Secretary. I deflected the request, suggesting a long-time agency colleague instead. John ignored my deflection and patiently mentored me as a new executive. The rest of my professional and personal life has been profoundly impacted by him.

I watched John take hard stands on controversial conservation issues. He was fearless. I also learned from him that there are times when taking a soft approach yields the best results. He inspired me to seek beneficial partnerships—friendships—with people and groups who seem diametrically opposed to my interests.

John was the heart and soul of some of Kansas' greatest conservation efforts and organizations. Among them is the Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education (KACEE). John's training as a forester and love of the prairie, coupled with a belief that people do the right thing if they understand what it is, drove him to champion KACEE. He was a primary force behind the adoption of Project Learning Tree, Project Wild and other culture-changing conservation education initiatives.

More than once, John told me he was proud to be among the first trustees in Kansas for The Nature Conservancy. As a TNC board member, his advice was always confident, sound and solidly rooted in common sense. He guided TNC's work with equal amounts of passion, insight and technical expertise. He was a conservationist and a gentleman in every way.

It is always too soon to lose friends and mentors like these. Thank you, my friends, thank you.

  
Rob Manes, State Director

For more information about the Anderson County Prairies preserve, visit [nature.org/andersoncounty](http://nature.org/andersoncounty).