



Honoring Jim & Nancy Patterson

For the love of the land – and a lifelong commitment to making things better.

For Jim and Nancy Patterson, stewardship is more than a value; it is a way of life. Their decades of involvement with the Foundation for Geauga Parks and organizations across Geauga County reflect a shared belief that caring for the land and community is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Their story began in Columbus, Ohio, where they met as members of the Ohio State Fair Junior Fair Board. Nancy was already a student at The Ohio State University when Jim began his studies there.

After graduation, they returned to Geauga County to continue Jim's family legacy – a farming tradition that spans five generations. "I farmed my whole life," Jim said. "After graduation, Nancy and I came back and started to farm. I bought this farm on Mulberry Road in Chester Township in 1969 from my aunt and uncle, and we can trace this farm back in the family to 1902." Nancy, a former preschool and first-grade teacher, eventually joined the farm full-time as their three children grew. Her gift for teaching flourished in a new setting as she welcomed countless children to the farm, offering hands-on lessons to those who had never experienced farm life.

The Pattersons' interests and service extend far beyond their fields. They have been deeply involved with the Geauga County Farm Bureau, Ohio State University programs, University Hospitals, and the DDC Clinic for Special Needs Children in Middlefield.

Nancy's path to the Foundation for Geauga Parks began with a simple invitation to serve on a committee – one that would ultimately help shape the Foundation's formation. "I was glad to serve," she said. "The parks are so important. When our children were younger, we visited the parks often and took part in the educational programs led by Nora the Explorer." From the beginning, the Foundation's purpose resonated with her: to support the work of the Geauga Park District, build community relationships, and raise funds when needed. "As time has gone by, many people have said 'yes' to that mission, and many funds have been raised," Nancy reflected.

Jim also played a key role in park leadership, serving on the Geauga Park District Board from 2010–2012. When his brothers, who operated the family's Orchard Hills Golf Course, prepared to retire, the family faced a pivotal decision. They knew they did not want the land developed. "We thought the best thing to do – which aligned with our values – was to enter into an agreement for the Geauga Park District to take it over," Jim said. "It was important. We really value having the park as our adjoining neighbor." Today, Orchard Hills Park sits beside Patterson Fruit Farm on Caves Road, a living testament to the family's commitment to preservation.

Do they have a favorite park? Unsurprisingly, Orchard Hills is high on the list. But their appreciation extends across the county. "We've had the opportunity to visit probably all of the parks," Jim said. "We've been to The West Woods, and a couple of years ago we walked Welton's Gorge – that really surprised us."

continued

Looking ahead, Jim and Nancy recognize that land preservation remains one of Geauga County's greatest challenges. "Some will want to preserve land; some will want activities on it. There's a balance," Jim said. Strong partners – including the Foundation for Geauga Parks and the Geauga Park District – continue working to protect land for today and for generations to come. "You know, once a property is gone, it's gone," Jim said. "It's not going to return to what it was." For Jim and Nancy Patterson, it truly is – and always has been – for love of the land.



Tribute to Jim and Nancy Patterson

by Christine Davidson, Executive Director, Foundation for Geauga Parks

"Tonight, the Foundation for Geauga Parks is honored to recognize Jim and Nancy Patterson for their extraordinary service to the Foundation, to the Geauga Park District, and to the people of Geauga County. This recognition is deeply meaningful – and, in truth, long overdue.

For decades, Jim and Nancy have helped shape the character of this county through leadership, stewardship, generosity, and a deep commitment to preserving the rural and natural beauty that makes Geauga County so special. Their contributions are woven into the landscape itself, and into the lives of countless people who have learned, gathered, explored, and made memories in the places they helped protect and strengthen.

Jim's service to Geauga County began early. At just 26 years old, he was appointed to the Geauga County Commission, becoming the youngest county commissioner in Ohio. During a time of growth and change, he helped guide conversations about how Geauga County could move forward while still holding onto the rural character that so many residents treasured. He later served on the Geauga Park District Board of Park Commissioners, including service as chairman, during a period of important park development and public investment in outdoor spaces.

Among the lasting examples of Jim's service is his role in the development of Observatory Park, now recognized as a rare dark sky park east of the Mississippi. That achievement reflects the kind of vision Jim brought to public service: the ability to see not only what a place is, but what it could become for future generations.

Jim and Nancy's family also made a remarkable contribution to the future of Geauga County's parks through the sale of Orchard Hills Golf Course land to the Geauga Park District in 2007. Rather than see the land developed, the family chose a path that allowed it to become part of the public park system. Today, that decision continues to benefit the community, transforming land once used for golf into a place of trees, trails, habitat, and public enjoyment."

continued

“Nancy’s contribution deserves special recognition. As a Founding Trustee of the Geauga Park District Foundation, she helped give shape and strength to an organization that would become an essential partner in supporting the parks, protecting natural spaces, and connecting people to the outdoors. In the Foundation’s earliest days, that kind of service required vision, trust, and a willingness to build something new – not for immediate recognition, but for long-term benefit.

Nancy brought to that founding role the heart of an educator, the perspective of a farmer, and the instincts of someone who understood how deeply people are shaped by their connection to the land. Her lifelong work introducing children and families to farm life, outdoor experiences, and the wonder of the natural world beautifully aligned with the Foundation’s mission. Through her leadership, she helped establish a culture of community connection, stewardship, and hands-on learning that continues to guide the Foundation today. As a teacher by training and a natural educator at heart, Nancy has spent a lifetime helping children and families understand where they live, how things grow, and why land matters. Her creation of Family Fun Fest in 1991 brought generations of families into closer relationship with the seasons, the land, and one another. That same spirit of welcome, learning, and connection helped shape her service as a Founding Trustee. It is fair to say that Nancy helped plant some of the Foundation’s earliest seeds. The work of today – scholarships, educational programs, conservation support, community partnerships, and projects that deepen public connection to Geauga County’s parks – grows from the kind of early leadership she helped provide.

Together, Jim and Nancy represent a kind of leadership that is humble, steady, and deeply rooted. They have never simply talked about community; they have built it. They have never simply admired the land; they have cared for it, worked it, protected it, and helped make it available for others to experience. Their service reflects the best of Geauga County: hard work, neighborliness, foresight, and devotion to something larger than oneself.

Their contributions to the Foundation for Geauga Parks and the Geauga Park District are not isolated moments. They are part of a larger legacy of civic responsibility and conservation-minded leadership. They understood that parks, farms, forests, night skies, and open spaces are not guaranteed. They must be valued. They must be protected. They must be passed on with intention.

That is why tonight’s recognition matters. It gives us the opportunity to say, publicly and with great gratitude, what should have been said long ago: Jim and Nancy Patterson have made an enduring difference in the life of this Foundation, this Park District, and this county.

Their legacy can be seen in protected land, in public parks, in children’s first outdoor discoveries, in families gathering year after year, and in the continued belief that Geauga County’s natural spaces are among our greatest gifts. Their example reminds us that conservation is not only about land. It is about people with the vision to protect it, the generosity to share it, and the patience to let its value grow over time.

On behalf of the Foundation for Geauga Parks, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Jim and Nancy Patterson. We honor their service, their leadership, their generosity, and their lasting contribution to the Foundation and to Geauga County. This recognition may be long overdue, but our gratitude is deep, sincere, and enduring.”