

BY Jean Smith, BOARD MEMBER AND FORMER PRESIDENT OF CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS

An Accreditation Success Story: **CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS**

CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS BEGAN AS MANY LAND TRUSTS DO: on a concern for the impact of growth and development on the natural features of the area. Founders Peter and Jeanie Van Nice are longtime residents of this southwest corner of Michigan that is home to lakes, dunes, white sandy beaches, quiet woodlands and farms. They noticed farmland and wooded areas quickly changing as developers capitalized on the region's proximity to Chicago and on city dwellers' desire for a country home. The Van Nices invited my husband, Steve, and me to join them as founders of Chikaming Open Lands in 1999. Our goal was to preserve the natural, scenic and agricultural lands of southwest Berrien County.



Jean Smith and Sophie

With little or no experience, we spent many hours around a kitchen table discussing what it takes to form a land trust and outlining future steps. Early on we realized the value of attending Land Trust Alliance Rallies in order to learn all that we could about how to effectively run a land trust. We were an all-volunteer land trust until 2005, when we hired our first staff person, Jean Brokish, as land protection specialist. Chikaming Open Lands now has 13 board members, one full-time and two part-time employees and is in the process of hiring an executive director. In nine years we have protected over 800 acres, we have more than

700 members, and we are extremely proud to be one of the 39 inaugural accredited land trusts. Accreditation can be achieved through a board-driven process, even if you are a small all-volunteer land trust.

Thinking about Accreditation

We first became aware of accreditation through Alliance publications and by attending sessions on accreditation at various Rallies. We discussed the possibility of applying for accreditation at board meetings but felt it was a goal for the future. The idea began to take on a life of its own, particularly as we learned how important the Alliance felt this process was for the success of the land trust movement. We won a small grant to do a self assessment and this put us on the path toward accreditation. Going through the assessment opened our eyes to the importance of understanding the 12 standards of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* while ensuring compliance.

As we worked through the self assessment, board member Don Flinn encouraged us to make the decision to apply for accreditation. He said simply, "What do we have to lose? The worst that can happen is that we don't get accredited, but we are

going to learn a lot, and we are going to be a stronger organization for trying." I realized the importance of what Don was saying and encouraged the board to seriously consider applying.

Completing the Assessments

In the fall of 2005 we went through our first guided assessment with Sylvia Bates, a land conservation consultant at that time. In this session we got to Standard 9. In the spring of 2006 the board and staff met with Jill Arango, who was the Alliance's Midwest field representative, to follow up on the self assessment. Finally in December 2007 the board met and completed the self assessment of standards 10, 11 and 12.

The assessments taught board members what was expected of a land trust and what it takes to be a well run, ethical, responsible organization. During the assessment sessions, we reviewed every aspect of our organization and necessary actions required to be in full compliance with the 12 standards. We assigned board members to address specific issues that needed corrective action and to write needed policies.

The Committee Gets to Work

In the summer of 2007 the board voted to apply for accreditation. I will never forget being in Denver for Rally as the names of the first land trusts selected to go through accreditation were announced. We were in the first group. At that point, I questioned if we were really prepared for this daunting process and the hours it was going to take. I sought advice from those in the pilot group and, hopefully, words of encouragement. Returning to Michigan, I quickly appointed a four-member accreditation committee made up of George Platz, Don Flinn, Jean Brokish and myself.

We toasted ourselves for committing hours to a process that has strengthened our organization and **enhanced our ability to protect land.**

We went through the 12 standards and assigned each one to a member of the committee or a particular board member who had the expertise in that area. Each person was responsible for filling out their part of the application and pulling together the documentation for that particular standard. We set up a large filing box with a folder for each standard and as something was completed it was placed in the folder. We started this process in October 2007 and had assembled all the initial information by the end of the year.

Jean compiled all the information, provided the documentation for the two land projects the accreditation committee had chosen to review, and compiled the application. It was at this point that we called in a consultant, Linda Strohl, whom we have worked with in the past. She worked with Jean reviewing the application and checking everything off of the Master Attachment Checklist. Bringing in an outside person to review the application brought a fresh perspective to the process and ensured we had fully answered the questions, that our policies were in order, and that proper documentation had been provided. At the same time, George and Don, both lawyers, were meticulous in reviewing the application.

Finally in April 2008 after about 600* hours of preparation time, we had two 3-ring binders ready to send to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

Follow-Up

On May 29, 2008 we had a one and a half hour conference call with the Commission review team assigned to our application. The phone call with the Commission is an important step in the accreditation process as it allows the review team to ask questions and seek clarification about the application.

Our review team had 13 follow-up questions. Jean and I reviewed the questions and assigned them to members of the accreditation committee to research and respond to during our conference call. The Commission review team listened carefully to our answers and gave us a sense of comfort that our application was in line with the standards. The review team was supportive and always helpful throughout the entire process. They told us that we could expect to hear their decision no later than early September.

Earning Accreditation

In early September Jean received the call that our application had been accepted and we would be in the inaugural group of land trusts to receive accreditation at Rally in Pittsburgh. We were ecstatic and relieved! I always felt that whether we received accreditation or not, we would be a stronger organization for going through the process. The process helped identify those areas within our organization that did not yet meet *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, and was an educational opportunity for our board by helping them understand their land trust and what was required for the organization to be an efficient, cost-effective land trust.

As I walked across the stage at Rally, I felt proud to be a member of Chikaming Open Lands, and more importantly, part of a larger national land trust movement. There was an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and pride not only for those 39 accredited land trusts, but for the hard work of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and for the vision of the Alliance to implement an accreditation

program that meets the public demand for accountability. This was a major milestone for Chikaming Open Lands and the Alliance as we continue to strive for excellence.

My message to those of you considering accreditation: Do it! You will learn, grow and enhance your land trust as you go through the process, making those changes to your organization that will improve how you operate. Ours was a board-driven effort with tremendous support by our staff. Accreditation is about good governance and that is what a board is ultimately responsible for. Looking back, I can say it was a daunting experience, but the outcome was rewarding. We now have the seal of approval. There have been those that questioned what accreditation actually means and how it will change the way you do things. The answer is that we will do them better and in accordance with *Land Trust Standards and Practices*.

Celebrating

We have trumpeted our success in many ways including sending a newsletter to our members, garnering local press coverage and placing the accreditation seal on our website and letterhead. More importantly, the board/staff celebrated this accomplishment together. We toasted the decision to go forward with accreditation and we toasted ourselves for committing hours to a process that has strengthened our organization and enhanced our ability to protect land. As members of the land trust movement it is our moral obligation to protect our natural heritage for future generations. Please join us in becoming accredited! 🍷

***Editor's Note:** *The Commission reports that the range of time spent by most applicants is between 100 and 600 hours, with a median of 345 hours. The degree to which a land trust has implemented Land Trust Standards and Practices before applying for accreditation greatly influences the time spent on the application.*