

Monroe Conservation Commission

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Cleaning up for a cause - Monroe couple inspires Conservationist of the Month program
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Mario and Kathy Hering don't consider themselves conservationists. They don't think they have done anything out of the ordinary to preserve the health and beauty of the natural environment.

But what they have done to rid their East Village Road neighborhood of unsightly litter and debris goes above and beyond the call of duty in the opinion of Monroe's Conservation Commission.

The Herings' action inspired the Conservation Commission to initiate a Conservationist of the Month program.

"After sharing with the members of the Conservation Commission all of the work they put into cleaning up East Village Road, we talked about how great it would be to acknowledge them somehow for all of their efforts," said Thomas Ellbogen, Conservation Commission chairman .

"And we know there are others with similar stories in town in

terms of cleaning up a polluted area or spearheading a neighborhood or community recycling effort, so we decided to launch a monthly program to hear about and recognize their stories."

After moving to a home off East Village Road several years ago, the Herings noticed that despite the lush forest and nearby Webb Mountain Park, trash build-up along the roadsides had become an eye-sore to residents and visitors.

In one particular stretch, between the second and third stop signs coming from Route 111, where there are no houses, the Herings found a breeding ground for trash. The road is narrow and winding and the gullies, they said, seem to attract litter.

With this in mind, Mario and Kathy began bringing trash bags with them on walks. Along the way they picked up anything out of place. Some of the things they have found along that one stretch of East Village Road are: Coffee cups, wine bottles, beer bottles, hard liqueur bottles, trash from McDonald's, and cigarette boxes, among other common items people have thrown out their car windows.

The Monroe Conservation Commission manages parks and open space properties for the town's enjoyment and use, including Webb Mountain Discovery Zone and Webb Mountain Park. It is in the planning stage for the Chalk Hill Nature Trail, Lane's Mines Park, and the Halfway River properties.

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"That stretch of road is a magnet for more trash if it is not maintained," said Mario.

The Herings have also found front doors and couches, although big items are rare, said Kathy.

"It's funny," she said, "but most of the stuff we find is booze. It's like they are driving and don't want to get caught with an open bottle in their car, so they throw it out the window."

The Herings believe that the trash continues to come from the same people.

"You can tell by the way some of the bottles are wrapped," she said, "that it is the same people over and over again."

"Some people just have no conscience about littering," said Mario.

Even so, Mario and Kathy believe that most people are aware of the effect littering has on the environment and the aesthetics of being out in nature.

"It is really only a small percentage of people who continue to litter," Kathy said.

"But even if it is only 5 percent of the population," Mario said, "that handful of people can produce a lot of garbage."

A couple times, when the Herings have been out with their trash bags collecting the garbage off the road, people have stopped and said thank you. Others, they said, have taken their example and began taking a bag with them on walks down East Village Road.

"You have to be prepared when you go out and bring a couple of bags with you," Mario said. "You can sometimes fill three big black garbage bags on one trip. That is easy to do, especially when spring comes."

A personal cause

The Herings, who have a mixed family - three boys and three girls between them - don't get paid for collecting trash off the roads, but for them, it is a personal crusade they are glad to do. "I enjoy the outdoors," Kathy said. "I love walking and spending time outside, so I hate to see it trashed. It is against nature."

Kathy, who used to live in Trumbull, said she collected garbage at Beaches Park when she lived there.

"I would take a trash bag or two with me on my walks and easily fill them up," she said. "Although after a while they would get heavy to carry."

Kathy said that collecting trash at Beaches Park is different than along East Village Road in that the park is more heavily traveled, so the volume is greater than in Monroe.

"One time I was walking along with my bags full," she said, "and a person drove up and took the bags I had filled. Then they gave me a new bag. It was just a really nice thing to do."

As a couple that has spent much time traveling and spending time in the great outdoors, Mario and Kathy appreciate the beauty of their natural surroundings. They camp and hike regularly, and have traveled to Mount Washington in New Hampshire and Acadia National Park in Maine.

"I don't think anyone appreciates seeing the countryside littered," Mario said. "It's distressing. If anything, we would want the people who are throwing their garbage out the car window to realize that it is bothersome, especially to us who live here and those who use the nearby parks."

The Herings also see the lack of recycling as a cause for some of the garbage, specifically water and soda bottles.

"There is a large percentage who are not recycling," Kathy said, despite the bottle receptacles at grocery stores. "Although there are some people who go around regularly on recycling day and take the bottles and cans from people's bins so they can return them. At least they are not ending up on the road."

While the Herings are modest about the cleanup work they have done on East Village Road, they are at a loss as to how to get the message across to those who are responsible for the garbage.

"How do you tell someone who habitually does something like that," Mario said, "so that it really gets to their core and means something important?"

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Seeks nominations

Residents can nominate themselves or other Monroe residents who are making a difference and having a positive impact for people, their resources and the environment (not necessarily only in Monroe). Nominations can be e-mailed to monroeconservation@monroect.org or mailed to the Monroe Conservation Commission 7 Fan Hill Rd. Monroe, CT 06468.

"We hope the Conservationist of the Month program will stir additional interest in the community to think about the environment and conservation, not just on Earth Day, one day a year, but on a monthly, weekly, even daily basis," Ellbogen said.

The Conservation Commission reviews all nominations at its regularly scheduled meeting on the first Wednesday of every month and will announce selections for Conservationist of the Month in the Monroe Courier and on monroeconservation.org.

In a society where millions of water bottles end up in landfills every day, and where fast food detritus defaces America's roadsides, activists like Mario and Kathy Hering are paving the road for the future. As spring comes into bloom, and the trash from the long winter is revealed, the Herings will continue to lead by example.

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The Monroe Conservation Commission
meets the first Wednesday of every month at 7:30pm
in the Town Hall conference room.
Public participation is welcome.
Email us at [Monroe Conservation](mailto:monroeconservation@monroect.org) with questions, comments
or concerns about our properties and nominations for Conservationist of the Month.

