

Catalyst Profile
Irene Van Hoff

For the past 14 years, Irene Van Hoff, who graduated in 1998, has been working to preserve the “cultural landscape” and flora of the Carl Sandburg Home. Days are spent pruning star magnolias, researching pompom dahlia varieties, and spraying wooly adelgid-fighting insecticidal soap on hemlocks.

Though her stewardship of the 264 acre National Historic Site began with a less than promising vegetation removal initiative, Van Hoff has since earned the title of “biological science technician.”

“When I joined the staff, I was seasonal and was hired for three months to remove and control invasive non-native plant infestations,” said Van Hoff. “The exotic weed removal stint led to new responsibilities.”

These responsibilities included reinvigorating a garden volunteer program and maintaining the historic landscape. Opportunities to develop project plans and to perfect funding proposals soon “morphed” into an annual assignment.

As components “began to congeal,” a natural resource program was formed. Soon, volunteers began assisting in conservation projects, a citizen science program was established, and hazard tree management was stressed.

While Van Hoff remains humble, quoting the adage of “no man is an island,” she was, and still is, integral to the preservation of Flatrock, North Carolina’s beloved landmark. However, this success wouldn’t have been possible without her natural resource management degree from WCU.

After attending Haywood Community College, Van Hoff began her “short” and “truly mind-expanding” year in the Whee. With a husband and four children at home, she sped through her studies, taking 19 to 21 credit hours per semester.

Though Van Hoff’s interests initially rested in fieldwork, courses such as Natural Resource Policy and Administration and Integrated Resource Management taught by the late Larry Kolenbrander, motivated Van Hoff to become involved in project planning and environmental compliance issues.

“Dr. Kolenbrander’s classes, combined with his unwavering enthusiasm, piqued my interest in government agencies and policy,” said Van Hoff.. “The material was captivating and has had a significant impact on my career. Thanks, Doc.”

Before taking the seasonal job at the Carl Sandburg Home, Van Hoff guided visitors at The Cradle of Forestry, cross-pollinated and emasculated tomato plants in a greenhouse and collected soil samples at a research facility.

“Never get frustrated thinking that the temporary position you take, which may be, at best, only vaguely related to your career objective, is a waste of time,” said Van Hoff. “Not so. Each job is a plus to your resume, an acquisition of new skills, an expansion of your knowledge base and a broadening of perspective.”

Just last year, Van Hoff graduated with a master’s degree in biology with a concentration in ecosystems conservation. Though it took six years, she says that her education has made the planning and decision-making processes more cognitive. Her education has “unlocked a new perspective to the field of resource stewardship.”

“Whether you take your education to the next level or not, be mindful to take each hurdle you encounter as an opportunity to develop proficiency,” said Van Hoff. “Obstacles can be unpleasant because they take us out of our comfort zone. Once overcome, we usually come out more experienced, smarter, and better prepared for the next jump.”