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Leo Nickasch is "Mr. Trees"

NEENAH-MENASHA—Mention the word "trees" and immediately the name Leo Nickasch comes to mind.

He's a well-known area conservationist who is determined to save our forests, and a dedicated nature lover who is eager to share that love with younger generations.

It doesn't take much conversation with Leo to discover his two favorite topics—"trees and kids."

Over the past two decades he has served on countless statewide and local environmental committees, promoted Arbor Day observances in Neenah-Menasha, distributed thousands of seedlings to Twin City children to plant and helped establish Trees for Tomorrow campership programs for elementary children.

Perhaps no other person in this community has done more to bring trees and children together in a special way designed to ensure the future of both.

"Every committee I've served on is oriented to the future," said Leo, running down the long list of panels ranging from the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Board of Directors and the Governor's Committee on Forest Productivity to the Trees for Tomorrow Advisory Council and the Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee.

"Saving things for children, that's the backbone of all we do," added the father of four and grandfather of seven.

This year, Leo has been named chairman of the Wisconsin Arbor Month Committee, a job he does not take lightly.

He proudly shows off a sample of the 2,500 Arbor Month teaching kits that have been distributed statewide. The observance traditionally begins with a variety of tree planting ceremonies and other activities on

April 30, Arbor Day.

Leo noted that this year's theme is "Trees and People Need Each Other" and several groups, including the Wisconsin Nurserymen's Association, the Wisconsin Paper Council and the U.S. Forest Service have cooperated in putting out the teaching guides.

That same spirit of cooperation has been evident in Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day projects and other efforts aimed at increasing environmental awareness in young people.



Leo Nickasch has been a leader in making Arbor Day a major event in the Neenah-Menasha area.

Members of both the Twin City Labor Council and the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce are strong backers of these programs, as are several industries and assorted individuals.

Each year the Arbor Day Committee makes sure fourth grade pupils at each public and private elementary school in Neenah-Menasha gets a seedling to plant. Last year, with

Leo's urging, a bill was passed allowing all fourth graders around the state to receive these seedlings.

The Committee also helps finance trips of local school children to Conservation Field Days at the Selle Family Farm and Rat River Wildlife area near Winchester and the annual trip to the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station at Amherst.

This April a total of 192 fifth and sixth graders from Neenah and Menasha participated, double the number of last year. In Leo's eyes that is real progress and he is looking forward to increasing the total every spring.

Leo has always had a strong interest in conserving our natural resources, particularly trees, but didn't get actively involved until the 1960's when he was appointed to the AFL-CIO state conservation committee as representative of his union local.

While on the panel he was named subcommittee chairman of forestry, and that job led to his involvement in environmental education.

Leo is retired now from his job as a mechanic for Kimberly-Clark Corporation but he is busier than ever. All those committee responsibilities take lots of time and travel. "Sometimes I feel like I'm driving in and backing out of the driveway at the same time," said the Neenah native.

He wouldn't dream of slowing the pace, not when there is so much to do.

And there is the reward of having the children respond with eagerness and enthusiasm. Leo gets hundreds of letters from youngsters appreciative of the trees they received to plant, the wildlife federation posters, the memorable camping and fieldtrip experiences . . . "Those letters are so touching," he said. "Sometimes, it's enough to make a grown man cry."