



Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame Foundation, Inc.

Celebrating, Advancing and Sharing Wisconsin's Conservation Legacy

Kathleen Falk

(1951 -)

Inducted 2022

Growing up in rural Waukesha County and influenced by her neighbor, outdoor writer Mel Ellis, Kathleen Falk started a conservation club in the 1950's for the children nearby. She was about 9 years old. Inspired by nature in those early years, Kathleen Falk has lived her life tirelessly advocating for conservation, the environment, and the underserved by bringing people together to change the world for the better. She developed the tools to be impactful by earning her law degree when women attorneys were few; engaged in the legal system and the three branches of government at the local, state and federal level to create a wide range of legislation and policy; and committed to mentoring the next generation of environmental advocates so her work and that of her peers would carry on.

After graduating from Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1976, she began her career as co-director and general counsel of Wisconsin's Environmental Decade (now Clean Wisconsin). There she successfully litigated law reform cases in the state's highest courts and won groundbreaking decisions such as the seminal case on the state's environmental impact statement law. She excelled at convincing courts to rule for the environment in those "first time cases."

As an Assistant Attorney General for 14 years, Kathleen served as one of the two chief environmental watchdogs for Wisconsin, the State Public Intervenor. Tasked with protecting the state's natural resources, she went to bat for citizens in every corner of the state. She successfully litigated and lobbied in many areas of public policy including water, wetlands, mining, farmland protection, public access to streams, and the land use impacts of transportation. Throughout these years she trained about a hundred legal interns from the UW Law School to be advocates and change-agents.

Kathleen was the first woman elected by the half of a million Dane County residents and became the longest serving elected County Executive in Dane County history (1997–2011). She made numerous outstanding and sustained contributions to conservation policy that have served as models for other communities statewide and beyond. Her strong management skills and inclusive leadership led to innovative land and clean water protections, initiatives to help move families out of poverty, and reforms to the criminal justice system. The environmental policies she successfully enacted were often the first or the strongest in the State. Her progressive policies and programs earned the support of differing political views. One example was the creation of the Dane County Conservation Fund which has resulted in the preservation of over 10,000 acres of land creating countless outdoor recreation opportunities.

In 2002 Kathleen became the first woman in Wisconsin to run for Governor on a major political party ticket. After leaving elected public office, the County Board named a 500-acre wildlife area along the Sugar River in southern Dane County the "Falk Wells Natural Resource Area" after her and her chief-of-staff, Topf Wells.



Kathleen Falk

2008. Photo by Shannon McMahon.

"It is hard to create change...but entirely possible." - Kathleen Falk

In 2013 when President Obama appointed her to his administration as the Regional Director for the US Department of Health and Human



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Services for the 50 million residents of the Great Lakes states, she brought her knowledge of the natural environment to the many issues of human health and well-being addressed by the federal government. An example was reflected in her work on the ground where she led the coordination of health services to assist citizens in Flint, Michigan, impacted by the drinking water crisis there.

Drawing upon her lifelong experience at every government level and in every branch of government, she taught graduate students for five years at several schools which included the University of Wisconsin Gaylord Nelson Institute where students were eager to "change the world" and are, indeed, carrying on her legacy.

Kathleen has mentored scores of environmental advocates, pragmatic problem solvers, policymakers, leaders, and champions. She has done this in countless ways, most notably through leading by example. Perhaps Kathleen's finest and most admirable quality is her ability to bring people together around a common goal so that environmental progress is made.

In her personal life she is married to former WI State Representative Peter Bock (Milwaukee) and is mother to son Eric. She particularly enjoys fishing the streams in Southwest WI and duck hunting in Door County. Her life's work has earned her recognition and awards from many statewide organizations, including Wisconsin Trout Unlimited, Gathering Waters conservancy, WI Council on Children and Families, WI Parks and Recreation Association, WI Women in Government, River Alliance of WI, and The Wisconsin Idea Award.