

He's environmentalism's elder statesman

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The internationally known environmentalist Russ Peterson is a native of Portage.

By Ann McBride
Portage Daily Register

PORTAGE — At 85, Russ Peterson remains committed to his ideals. Just this year, this internationally known environmentalist traded in his Honda for a Toyota hybrid, an eco-friendly vehicle that gets upwards of 50 miles to the gallon.

Why the switch? Peterson said it was his long-standing support of developing alternative energy sources that led him to say: "Come on, Peterson. You better put your money where your mouth is. Boy, it was the right decision."

Peterson, a one-time governor of Delaware (1969-1973) and a 1934 Portage High School graduate, has never faltered in his beliefs as he continues to express his views on prison reform, protecting the world's natural resources and controlling its population.

It's a life that, growing up in relative poverty in Portage, Peterson never imagined, but has given him immense satisfaction.

"What could be better than working to provide humanity, including one's own descendants, with a sustainable livelihood? Peterson asks, as quoted in his 1999 autobiography, "Rebel with a Conscience."

"What better vocation is there than striving to save life on Earth? The opportunity for job satisfaction is high, as millions of people have already discovered. And the risk is minor: being belittled by those who do not believe the predicament exists ... those who champion the status quo."

Peterson was never one to follow the status quo from his first parlay into politics as a liberal Republican to his 1996 decision to switch to the Democratic Party. He's always believed: "Each of us can make a difference. ... We need not wait for others."

Peterson was honored this summer in Delaware with the dedication of a bronze statue that depicts this avid birder and former president of the National Audubon Society in a familiar pose — carrying field glasses and searching the landscape.

Although the statue, which sits at the entrance to a riverwalk along the Christina River, partly pays tribute to Peterson's work in helping to push the Legislature to create the Riverfront Development Corp. of Delaware, it's actually a monument to a lifetime of work for a man often referred to as a "do-gooder" during his early years in politics.

"Russ Peterson is one of those people whose stature has grown even after his tenure in public life because he has been a tireless spokesman for ... our highest aspirations as human beings," Michael Purzycki, RDC executive director, said

during a telephone interview. "(He) demands respect and commands it. He's well respected among even people who disagree with him."

In addition to the statue, Peterson was earlier honored with the naming of a 202-acre freshwater marsh to the Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge is part of the overall redevelopment of the waterfront, something that Peterson envisioned — and pushed for — years before it came to fruition, Purzycki said.

Purzycki referred to the Wilmington property as a one-time "moribund industrial zone that Russ looked at and said 'Here is something very special.' He saw more clearly than others what our riverfront could be."

Early years

Peterson, who was born in 1916 and lived with his family in the bottom half of a rented home in Portage, was the seventh out of a family of eight boys.

His father, a Swedish immigrant and strict disciplinarian, worked as a baker, leaving the house at 6 p.m. and returning at 6 a.m. six nights a week. His mother was a homemaker who, on the side, baked and sold cakes to help support the family.

The family didn't have much. The Bible was the only book in the house and the family used it to record important dates such as births, deaths and marriages.

But Peterson said although times were tough — the family had to go on the public dole once after his father was diagnosed with cancer — he never felt poor.

"We never had any money," Peterson said during a telephone interview from his home in Wilmington. "I didn't realize it at the time that I was in a very poor family because I always had a good time."

There were only two occasions Peterson recalled he felt the sting of poverty.

One was when he got to a birthday party and found out that everyone was going to go to a movie and needed a dime.

"Well, I couldn't go — that was a little bit irritating," he said.

The other occurred when he had to drop out of the Boy Scouts because he didn't have enough money to buy a uniform. Even as a child, Peterson showed signs of being a conservationist when he would go throughout the city, collecting junk and selling it to the junk man.

"We didn't call it recycling in those days but really that's what it was," he recalled.

At Portage High School, Peterson excelled at sports and served as president of his senior class. "Most of my life in Portage, I wanted to be like Babe Ruth," Peterson said. A teacher who made high school chemistry classes exciting, spurred a new dream — to become a famous chemist.

When Peterson left to go to college at UW-Madison, he had



Contributed photo

Portage native Russ Peterson was honored this summer with the dedication of a bronze statue, depicting the former Delaware governor and avid bird watcher, at the entrance to a riverwalk along Delaware's Christina River.

hopes of becoming a famous scientist that would one day "solve the cancer problem."

One thing was for sure, Peterson said, "I wanted to do something important."

Peterson received his doctorate in chemistry in 1942. He relocated with his wife, Lillian (Turner), who also grew up in Portage, and their two sons, to Delaware to take a job with chemical giant DuPont, a company he stayed with for 26 years. He was involved in the development of Dacron polyester fiber and other major breakthroughs in the carpet industry and the manufacture of nylon-reinforced tires.

But even as Peterson's career took off at DuPont, he never forgot what it was like to be an underdog, championing the causes of the less fortunate as head of his church's Social Action Committee.

Peterson first entered politics when he successfully ran for governor after gaining notoriety as the leader of a citizens campaign looking to make changes in the state's antiquated prison systems.

He was defeated in his attempt to win a second term and this election ended up being his only stint in a political office although there were several attempts made to convince him to run for a national office, even president.

But Peterson made the most of his one term, and one piece of legislation — the 1972 Coastal Zone Act — was championed by environmentalists around the world and remains the pinnacle of his career.

The legislation pitted Peterson against powerful oil companies in their bid to develop the Delaware waterfront by banning heavy industry from a two-mile-wide strip of the state's 115 mile coastline. It was the first state law of its kind and stimulated coastal zone legislation in other states, although no other state has succeeded in prohibiting by statute heavy industry in its coastal zone.

Purzycki said while Peterson may be an idealist, he's not blind to the realities of tackling tough problems as evidenced by his ability to get the Legislature to support the controver-

Russ Peterson's career

◆ Author of "Rebel With a Conscience," published in 1999, and a CD-ROM, "We Can Save the Earth," published in 2000.

◆ Governor of Delaware from 1969 to 1973.

◆ Vice president and regional councilor of the World Conservation Fund until 1990 and is now president emeritus of the International Council for Bird Preservation.

◆ Vice chairman and president of the Better World Society from 1985 to 1990, an organization that he and cable television magnate Ted Turner founded to educate people about threats to the world environment.

◆ President of the 500,000 member National Audubon Society from 1979 to 1985; society member since 1952.

◆ Appointed in 1978 as director of the Office of Technology Assessment, a congressional research arm.

◆ Chairman from 1973 to 1976 of the President's Council on Environmental Quality.

◆ A former vice chairman of the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Conference on Human Settlements and to the U.N. World Population Conference.

◆ Among his many accolades is the National Wildlife Federation's Conservationist of the Year award, which he received in 1971, and the Green Century award from the Resource Renewal Institute, which he received in 1999.



Peterson

sial measure.

"He's got a very sensible approach in dealing with society's problems," Purzycki said.

"I get frustrated with us human beings. We really don't face up with critical problems that deal with the disadvantaged people," he said, noting in Delaware it cost \$70,000 a year to lock up a juvenile, yet with \$30,000 you could send that same person to Harvard.