

State's first lady takes walk at Carnes Park

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, May 16, 2014 5:33 pm

JEFFERSON — Tonette Walker and dozens of area residents on Friday took a scenic hike through Dorothy Carnes County Park in May's "Walk with Walker."

Walk with Walker is a regular series that takes Wisconsin's first lady to lesser-known natural locations a round the state to showcase the scenery, while promoting health and fitness. The events began in 2011, and since then, Walker has visited 32 locations in all corners of the state.

"Each month, one trail is selected and the first lady is joined by local residents ... who together walk a short trail, exploring Wisconsin's treasure chest of picturesque scenery," according to the Walk with Walker website.

The Jefferson County event on Friday showcased Dorothy Carnes County Park West, off Radloff Lane in the Town of Jefferson, as part of the larger Glacial Heritage Area.

The Glacial Heritage Area is a network of parks, wildlife and natural areas, historic and cultural sites connected to each other and nearby cities and villages by trails, waterways and nature preserves that stretches across Jefferson, Dane and Rock counties. The state Department of Tourism, which organizes Walk with Walker, initially contacted the Jefferson County Parks Department and Friends of the Glacial Heritage Area Group to say it wished to hold one walk in the area, Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer said.

"We couldn't be happier that we were doing that, and they followed through on that and we had an opportunity to feature one of the major conservation parks in the Glacial Heritage Area," he said.

With more than two-dozen people in attendance, the event was led by a local resource of a different kind. Naturalist Dick Wanie, a retired Fort Atkinson biology teacher, served as tour guide and educator throughout the 1.5-mile walk, pointing out bird species, calling to owls and quizzing participants on what they were observing through their binoculars.

"Dick is just a fantastic person. We are so fortunate to have him," Nehmer said. "He spent his whole life in the classroom teaching students, and now continues through his adulthood to teach people of all ages. He does it so amazingly well and with such passion. He's a fun guy to listen to."

Walker said that the birding aspect of the walk, which included observing several species of swallows, sparrows, bluebirds and looking into nests, was a unique experience.

"I really have never done the bird tour before. So for people that have come with us more than once, they're always different. Every single one," Walker said.

Walk with Walker originally began as a fitness program when her husband, Gov. Scott Walker, was the Milwaukee County executive. The first lady explained that he would encourage courthouse employees and local residents to walk with him at lunch time, and she took up the program when the family moved into the Governor's Mansion in Maple Bluff.

The initial focus was on fitness and exercise, but when the crowd for her first events drew many elderly people and parents with strollers, she said it was time to retool.

“We talked about it a little more and we thought obviously we want to get out and get moving, but it’s not going to be our focus. It’s going to be more of a guide like we had today, and we’re going to learn about Wisconsin’s agriculture, Wisconsin’s resources and birds, and, really I think it turned out better,” Walker said. “I think that we might have been on this fitness walk and kind of missing a lot of things along the way.”

Since then, the first lady has visited 32 locations around the state, trying to drive interest in some of the state’s lesser-known natural areas. Joined for Friday’s walk by officials from the state Department of Tourism, she said Dorothy Carnes County Park was chosen to bring the event to an area that hadn’t yet been on the schedule.

“We have a map that shows everywhere we’ve been, and we kind of missed (this area), so we thought ‘we’ve got to circle back and get over that way,’” she said of Jefferson County.

Nehmer said he hopes Walker’s interest in the Glacial Heritage Area will help focus others’ attention on some great parks they otherwise might have missed. In fact, it might already be working — some of the residents who joined the first lady on her walk said that although they live only a few miles away, they had never visited the park.

“We’re hoping to continue to try to get the word out about our parks, but particularly, the Glacial Heritage Area (GHA),” Nehmer said. “It’s such a great resource we have right here between Madison and Milwaukee, and we just hope that people will see that and take advantage of it.”

The outdoor event was followed by a reception at 2 Rivers Bicycle and Outdoor in Fort Atkinson, where the focus was on the way the GHA has supported the local economy and helped local businesses grow and thrive.

“The GHA for us has a big impact ... We’re helping them get more people involved, they’re helping us get more of our customers involved,” said the business’ co-owner, Scott Thomas. “And it’s really important to us, because we know ... that when people have access to these activities, people stick around longer. People become more active.”

Jefferson County Supervisor and Glacial Heritage Area supporter Augie Tietz echoed that statement, and said that he foresees only positive growth coming from the area’s recreational opportunities.

“One of the things we’ve been promoting is that the GHA is good for the economy, and this is probably one of our biggest successes, when they located in downtown Watertown,” Tietz said, referring to 2 Rivers Bicycle and Outdoor. “Though the business began in Fort Atkinson, they opened a second location in Watertown about two years ago. I hope it keeps growing throughout the county and the GHA.”

Meanwhile, area merchants contributing to the brunch at 2 Rivers Friday were: Abendroth Water Conditioning, Aggie’s Specialty Cakes, Bon Ton Bakery, Capputan, River’s Edge Meat Market and Catering, Fort Atkinson Pick’n Save and Humphrey Floral and Gift.