

## Creating a Tree Sanctuary

By, Dale Neal  
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Shelli Stanback didn't just want to write checks to worthy causes that help preserve our natural world or promote a healthier future. "It's a different kind of commitment," the long-time Asheville philanthropist said. "You don't miss the view or the history, until it's gone."

Richmond Hill lost its landmark mansion to an arson in 2009 before Stanback purchased the 54-acre property to create the OM Sanctuary wellness and meditation retreat center.

Stanback has made sure the green woods overlooking the French Broad won't be lost.

Along with the city-owned Richmond Hill Park nearby, the OM Sanctuary's woods represent the city's largest protected tract of urban forest, just a couple of miles from the heart of downtown.

"Natural places are essential for human health," Stanback said. "Once they have been lost to development they are gone forever. We must preserve them now for our sake, and for the sake of the future."

Working with the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, OM Sanctuary placed an easement on some 42 acres containing cove forest, oak forest and low mountain pine forest, with mixed hardwoods. The tract also contains pools in the river floodplain that provide habitat for salamanders, amphibians and reptiles.

"It is a rare gem containing an uncommon cluster of natural features near Asheville's urban core," said Carl Silverstein, SAHC's executive director. The forest provides ecosystem services and preserves a scenic view seen by many people every day: recreational users of the French Broad River and everyone who drives past it."

### Finding sanctuary

About five years ago, Stanback was attending a retreat for the Southern Law Environmental Center meeting at Richmond Hill. The Victorian landmark mansion built by U.S. Sen. Richmond



Pearson had been razed by an arson in 2009. The inn had other buildings added in the 1990s but was facing bankruptcy.

She remembered standing under the willow tree outside when the decision came to her. "I could do this for the people of Asheville and beyond. I could create a sanctuary here."

With funds from the Brad and Shelli Stanback Foundation, she formed a nonprofit to buy the property for \$4.5 million in 2011.

Stanback has been interested in healing since she was a girl suffering from migraines and looking for relief. She was deeply interested in alternative medicines and environmental issues long before she met her husband, Brad.

His family had made money with the Stanback headache powders, invented in Rowan County in 1911, and familiarized by the slogan "Snapback with Stanback."

Her father-in-law, Fred Stanback Jr., was roommates at Harvard with famed investor Warren Buffett. Stanback went on to become a private investor and influential philanthropist based in Salisbury. With his wife, Alice, he's made millions of dollars in gifts, protecting vistas along the Blue Ridge Parkway with conservation easements.

Shelli and Brad Stanback continue that family legacy through their own foundation. They recently gave \$1 million to the American Chestnut Foundation, trying to restore the chestnut trees that were killed off in the Appalachians by blight.

They also live the lifestyle, raising their four children in a house off-the-grid with its own solar powered electricity. The Stanback kids grew up eyeing green monitors that said when there was enough power to use a toaster or other appliance, she said.

"We don't just talk the talk, we walk the talk," she said.

### Restoring native forest

The cherry trees are in bloom in the meditation garden where OM Sanctuary's landscaper Aaron Lodge is filling in a new labyrinth path amid the plantings. He's been working with volunteers from MountainTrue to help rid the forest of invasive species like multiflora rose that can form thickets beneath the canopy and choke out native plants.

OM Sanctuary is discussing a controlled burn with foresters and Asheville Fire Department to help remove invasive species. "That would help us open up the forest. We have some old growth trees down there, including a 50-inch oak," Lodge said.

Protecting the natural surroundings fits into OM Sanctuary's mission as a healing center,



Stanback said. And Asheville was a natural setting for such a center.

"Asheville has always been a unique place that has drawn people for healing, for rest and relaxation. The Vanderbilts first came here for rest, and stayed to build Biltmore," she said.

At the turn of the century, dozens of hospitals and sanitariums offered treatments for tuberculosis patients who wanted clean, cool mountain air.

Many people travel for healing and relaxation to renowned centers like Kripalu in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, or the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Asheville needed its own world-class holistic education retreat, Stanback vowed.

But OM Sanctuary isn't just an ivory tower enclave. Stanback has worked with Riverlink to donate property along the river to continue the growing greenway. And as programs develop at OM Sanctuary, there will be more opportunities for locals to enjoy stress-relieving and healing workshops and training.

Beyond the sanctuary's tranquil setting and the protected woods, Stanback worries about Asheville's current evolution to more traffic and development. "We're growing faster than we're keeping up. I've been here for 30 years, but we still don't have the pedestrian-friendly streets and greenways that companies are looking for. Yet, Asheville has people who are concerned about sustainability."

That willow tree that Stanback made her decision beneath was cut down last year, due to disease. The house and inn are no more, but Richmond Hill is still engraved on the pillars marking the entrance. Things change, but Stanback sees preservation at work.

"This place is evolving. You build off your history. You don't wipe it out. It's like honoring the ancestors," she said.

For more information, click on [www.omsanctuary.org](http://www.omsanctuary.org)