Breakfast in the Woods

BY JOSH CLAGUE

When I first met my future wife, Tracey, I was a long way from home. I grew up among the evergreen forests of the Pacific Northwest, and she was raised on a small dairy farm here in the Northeast. Knowing nothing about cows, and feeling quite homesick, I was nervous when she invited me to visit the farm and meet her family for the first time.

Upon my arrival, Tracey offered to show me around the farm to help me feel at ease, and we headed off on a walk down the lane. After passing by a few barns and a pasture, she led me into a 40-acre tract of woods at the center of the farm.

Walking along the road hand-in-hand, Tracey wasn't just creating a romantic moment—these woods were special to her, as much a part of her life as the cows and cornfields, and this walk was about building in me the same connection to this place that she felt. It was about making me feel at home.

As we walked, Tracey shared one of her fondest childhood memories, which occurred among these very trees. At the invitation of her grandfather, Tracey's family and other local dairy farmers had gathered one October morning for a feast to celebrate the hard work and bounty of the previous year. This “breakfast in the woods” was enjoyed so much that it became an annual tradition, highly anticipated by young and old alike. Out of sight from the constant demands of the farm, the adults were able to relax and enjoy one-another’s company. The children played among the trees, free to explore, be noisy, and get dirty without a care in the world.

As the warmth and bustle of summer began to give way to the cooler, calmer days of autumn, the forest became the perfect setting for these families to pause and contemplate the challenges and rewards of farming, and to share their hopes for the year ahead.

The woods sit upon the steepest land within the farm, where deep tree roots hold the soil in place and protect the adjacent crop fields from the damaging effects of erosion. When Tracey’s grandfather set aside these 40 acres of trees, however, it was more than just a practical soil conservation measure. It was an agreement he forged with future generations, a recognition that land stewardship is a commitment that lasts more than a single lifetime.

Tracey’s grandfather also felt a connection to these woods as a place of respite and recreation, a place to relax and reflect. He understood that for his children and grandchildren to value them the same way he did, they needed to spend time here for reasons other than work. It’s no coincidence, then, that he chose this forest as the backdrop for that first breakfast celebration.

More than three decades after that first breakfast in the woods, Tracey and I were once again walking hand-in-hand through the forest. Our children ran ahead to greet the rest of our family and friends, enticed by the sound of laughter and smell of good food wafting through the trees.

I never met Tracey’s grandfather, but I’m sure he would be pleased to know that my appreciation for these woods has grown deep. Now that bond is being nurtured in the newest members of our family, strengthened by the celebration and sustenance this place provides.

As our small community gathered, a sense of hope and gratitude could be heard in our conversations. Hope for the new generation of farmers who must care for this land while facing the challenges of modern-day farming. And gratitude for the forest surrounding us, which has sustained not just the soil beneath our feet, but also our cherished tradition.

Josh Clague is a Section Chief for Forest Preserve Planning in DEC’s Division of Lands and Forests.