

# A Teacher's Legacy

by Paul Schnell

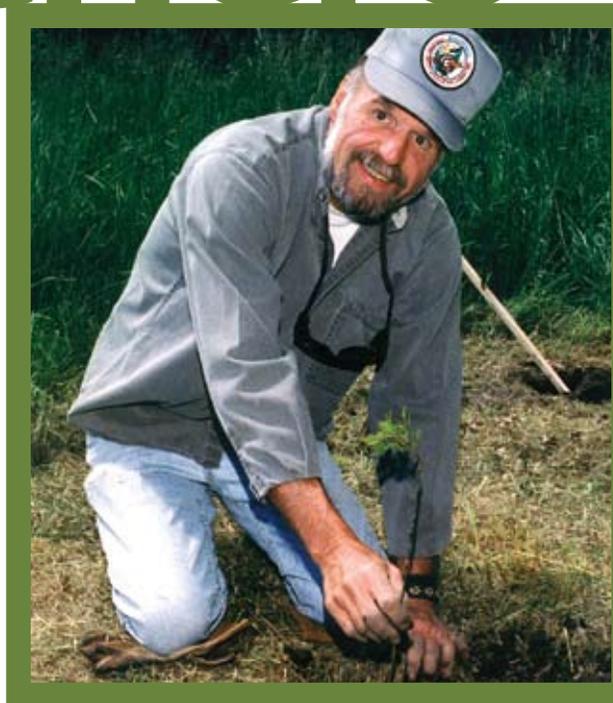
For 60 years, volunteers like Don Bronson have been sharing conservation messages and making hunters safer.

**Editor's Note:** This year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New York's Hunter Education Program. In observance of this milestone, we offer herein a profile of one volunteer instructor. While you may not have had the good fortune to meet Don Bronson, he is symbolic of the many instructors across this great state of ours who tirelessly volunteer their time to pass the traditions of hunting, archery, waterfowl identification and trapping on to the next generation. —D. Nelson

Afficionados of vintage American side-by-sides—the Foxes, Parkers, Lefevres—would look askance at this Sears and Roebuck Co. brand. It was, however, the nicest of the three double guns that Paul Bronson, Don's eldest son, said I could select from the estate of his beloved dad.

The other two, a severely tired Sears Co. gun and a sloppy Brazilian over/under, were entirely unsuitable for the memories I held of my dear friend and mentor Don Bronson of Newfane, a quaint town in western New York. While fine arms collectors might call them "beaters," that is, inexpensive, well-used field pieces, I like to think of the Sears guns as all-American, utilitarian straight shooters—in every respect like their previous owner.

You see, Don was a no-nonsense, meat-and-potatoes guy. His sons Paul and Greg are likewise. A product of the post-war era, Don was a U.S. Marine, college graduate, high school science teacher and a respected hunter safety and waterfowl identification instructor for more than 35 years. In his time, he taught thousands.



Studio Z Photography — Alan Zamorski

Don's legacy is not in his many accolades, rather it lies in the many lessons he instilled in young hunters about respecting the world around us.

As a respected Hunter Education Master Instructor, he also taught dozens of volunteers to become archery and firearms safety trainers. His gravelly voice sounded, at times, like the heavy report of a 10-gauge bearing down on overhead geese. Don's sometimes gruff, impenetrable exterior however, contained a gentle, unassuming manner that lent itself to the "teachable moment." It was a congenial mix of disciplining father, lovable uncle, professor, and competitive brother.

I first met Don in 1973 as his hunter safety student. Two years later, Dad and I enrolled in his waterfowl identification course so we could hunt in the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge in western New York. In 1994, my son Luke, age 12, took Don's class, and in 2000, Caleb, at 12, followed suit. Three generations; one teacher.

Don believed that new hunters should start with a single-shot shotgun. His mantra: using a single-shot improves a young hunter's proficiency. In time, graduating to a double-barrel was equally sporting. To this day, many hunters still use these classic side-by-sides and over-and-under guns, preserving the aesthetics and mystique of a bygone era.



## DID YOU KNOW?

In 1949, NYS enacted a law requiring all first-time hunters to pass a hunter education course. This law was a direct result of sportsmen's requests to attempt to reduce the number of hunting-related accidents.

New York's Sportsman Education Program is directed by DEC and delivered by volunteer instructors. The program serves to train "safe, knowledgeable, responsible and involved hunters."

Most of the funding for hunter education comes from excise taxes on firearms and ammunition.

NY has 2,500 volunteer instructors, who certify 30,000 students in 1,200 courses each year.

Courses are generally given from August to October in advance of fall hunting seasons, and in March and April in advance of spring turkey hunting seasons.

To find a course near you, visit: [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html) or call 1-888-HUNT-ED2 (1-888-486-8332).

Over the years, Don received many accolades from his peers. At the 2005 Conservation Federation awards banquet in Niagara County, Don received Bowhunter Safety Educator of the Year. A very surprised Donald approached the emcee and upon accepting the award, leaned forward into the microphone and quietly declared, "It's a conspiracy." Moments later, after returning to our table, I pressed him to explain. He whispered, "Others are more deserving."

In 2003, the western NY chapter of Pheasants Forever sponsored Don, me and a couple of others to attend the first workshop held in the state to become Leopold Education Project facilitators: to teach schoolteachers and students the conservation philosophy of Aldo Leopold, considered the father of wildlife management. Leopold's crowning literary achievement, *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949, is thought by many to be the definitive statement on the modern conservation ethic.

In one activity, participants were asked to jot down the name of a person who had positively affected their life, and why. Someone in the class

indicated that Don had a significant impact on their life, that he displayed great integrity and discipline, and had the gift of a talented teacher. In many ways, they felt he espoused the values attributed to the late, great Leopold—naturalist, conservationist, sociologist, and family man.

Don had no time for self-serving individuals, braggarts or game law violators. At Niagara-Wheatfield High School, where he taught for 26 years, former students recall certain pupils being suspended for disrespect or tardiness.

Once, in a hunter safety class filled to capacity, two young men arrived late—three minutes late by our watches. Their swagger of indifference was readily apparent as they approached Bronson the Instructor. Don's stern rebuke, "You're late; the class has already started," met with little resistance as the pair returned to their car.

I suspect Don's Marine Corps duty coupled with countless hours spent in his beloved duck blinds and deer stands shaped his punctuality and focus. He possessed sharp wit and was well-read. We spent many hours discussing current environmental issues, articles and books recently read.



Don's no-nonsense, yet compassionate, disposition made him—and others like him—the perfect candidate to teach young hunters about the importance of hunter safety and conservation traditions.

Don's library contained mostly science and outdoor related titles: natural history, botany, hunting, woodcraft, history. Ian McHarg's "Design with Nature" was a favorite. McHarg's tenet—that wise land use and planning are necessary for humans to coexist with nature and natural processes—held great appeal to Don.

In the courtyard at Niagara-Wheatfield, Don's students created a natural habitat complete with a pond, turtles, native trees, shrubs and bird-feeders. Songbirds, pheasants and waterfowl frequently visited and occasionally nested there. He was proud of the students' accomplishments. Like

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Leopold, Don believed that introducing youth to the joys of nature, whether hunting, fishing, trapping or simply marveling in its beauty, was a key element in building real American character.

After retirement, Don continued to share his understanding of the co-dependency of wildlife and habitat. As a board member of the American Chestnut Foundation (ACF), Don distributed hundreds of native chestnut seedlings that he grew in cardboard milk cartons. Visitors to his ACF table at conservation events

learned about the rare trees and were given a free tree with instructions on how to nurture and grow one. For his efforts, the NYS Chapter awarded him the Director's Award for Excellence in Education.

However, Don's legacy wasn't measured in the many awards that he collected over the decades, but in his practicing wise stewardship of natural resources, and particularly for mentoring young people. Don stressed personal accountability for one's actions, to be knowledgeable in the subject one



Kenneth Baginski

Not only does hunter safety education teach young hunters valuable and important lessons, it also promotes the practice of conscientious stewardship of our natural resources.



As a hunter education instructor, Don used many items as reference and teaching materials for his class. Here is a collection of some of the things Don held most dear: important works on ecology, conservation ethics, and his side-by-side shotgun.

pursues, and to share what one has learned for the benefit of the resource and for the development of the individual as well.

These are the intangible things that I am reminded of every time I shoulder Don's old Sears twin-barrel. And sometimes in the quiet, I hear Don compassionately teach me yet again.

Photographer and previous *Conservationist* contributor **Paul Schnell** lives in Hilton, NY.



As a final tribute to Don Bronson's conservation legacy, Don was inducted into the New York State Outdoorsmen Hall of Fame (NYSOHF) at the 25th Anniversary banquet in Canastota, April 26, 2008.

The NYSOHF recognizes sportsmen and sportswomen from all parts of New York State who have given selflessly to improve hunting, trapping, and fishing, and the preservation of the environment.

According to President Leo Maloney, "Some members of the OHF have made major, well-publicized achievements while others have worked anonymously helping achieve their goals slowly over many years. By recognizing individuals and uniting them in a common organization, the Hall of Fame helps to create even more momentum for the common goals."

The NYSOHF is also involved with other activities that further the enjoyment and preservation of the outdoor

heritage. Members frequently present seminars, conduct clinics, or are involved in educational displays and programs. There is a special focus on getting youth involved through fishing derbies, casting clinics, working with handicapped youngsters, or Future Anglers Outreach (FAO). FAO is a program that provides tackle to interested youth and instructs them and their parents or guardians in hopes that they will avoid frustration, enjoy success, and continue fishing as a lifelong sport.

More than 200 men and women have been honored with induction into the NYSOHF. Classmates of Don's inducted in 2008 include Bud Woodfield, Ron Kolodziej, Tim Noga and Scott Sampson; like Don, Tim and Scott were inducted posthumously.

Plaques highlighting their achievements are displayed in the OHF located inside Gander Mountain's store at 8634 Clinton Street, New Hartford. The website is [www.nysohf.org](http://www.nysohf.org).