

How Covid-19 and a Sprained Ankle Led to the Beginning of a New Friends of Cook Forest Project

by Mary Beth Doyle

In early March, my husband, Mike, and I decided to “take to the woods” in response to the news that people were beginning to shut down due to the oncoming pandemic from China. We live in Pittsburgh, but have a second home in Scotch Hill, where we have been visiting on a regular basis since we were married in 1978. Rushing up and down the stairs to gather items to take with us to Clarion, I slipped and fell, and sprained my ankle.

A few weeks later, having begun to recuperate from the sprain, and restless from the unaccustomed “cabin fever” in the house in Scotch Hill, I remembered the Paved Trail in Cook Forest. It was easier to walk than other, rougher trails with my ankle still in an Ace bandage and cast, and I walked there many times in those early weeks of quarantine.

Fast forward a few weeks and we were back in Pittsburgh for a short visit. Because my ankle was so much better, Mike and I sought new paths to walk. We found some walks in Boyce-Mayview Park in Upper St. Clair and while we were there, we found a very curious trail called the Brendon Gallagher Sensory Trail. Built by local Boy Scouts, the trail was 415 feet long with posts and a guide rope showing the way for those who are blind. But the most interesting feature were seven large signs with raised line words and Braille telling visitors what they would encounter on the walk.



We had never seen such a trail before and were fascinated with it and its possibilities. For the better part of my adult life, I had worked at the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at the local community college and had devoted my life to providing services to people who were disabled. Moreover, my granddaughter, Mandy, after many years of struggling with pediatric glaucoma, had just become completely blind. I knew she would certainly recognize the value and possibilities of such a trail.

I remembered the Paved Trail in Cook Forest and thought that that trail would make a perfect Sensory Trail for people with disabilities in the Clarion area and visitors to Cook Forest. I began questioning the people at Cook Forest and the Park Manager, Ryan Borcz encouraged my husband and me to join the Friends of Cook Forest to seek assistance to develop my proposed project more fully. With the support of Carl Harting, Chair of the Friends of Cook Forest, we have introduced the idea to the Board of Directors and begun costing out the project.

Since that time, I have researched other Sensory Trails and have found many other such trails in the United States and elsewhere. These trails provide the elderly, the young, persons with disabilities a multitude of reasons to visit the forest, some for the first time. It offers opportunities for outdoor education and hands-on alternatives to learn about conservation and the unique flora and fauna of this Cook Forest area. I feel more certain than ever that Cook Forest, the premier State Forest in Pennsylvania is a great place to develop an ADA accessible trail for people with disabilities. In fact, it will be a trail for everyone.

Would you like to help? We are seeking people to help clean the Paved Trail, clear out invasive grasses and make contacts with local businesses and industry, schools and social service agencies to garner local support for the project. We also will need people to volunteer to walk the trail and do what is called “sensory mapping” to help develop what should be said on the braille signs. To donate funds to provide the trail with signs or new seating for rest stops, you can visit friendsofcookforest.org (Friends of Cook Forest website) to make a donation or by check/money order payable to ‘PPFF’ (with ‘sensory trail’ written in the memo line) mailed to: Friends of Cook Forest, PO Box 31, Cooksburg, PA 16217. For more information, contact Carl at cfriendstreas@gmail.com.