When the Anderson Woods Nature Preserve opened near Lake Michigan in 2015, the dedication ceremony was a perfect reflection of the project—and the community as a whole.

Families walked through glades lush with blueberry and wintergreen. People with mobility and vision challenges navigated the universal access trail through the towering oak and white pine forest. Dick Hansen, the project’s primary benefactor, gathered with relatives to celebrate the opening of the Sandy Hansen Birding Trail, named in honor of his late wife. Motorcycles rolled into the parking lot, and veterans wearing leather vests got off their bikes, families in tow, to proudly show off the trail they had built.

“The accessible trail at Anderson Woods now gives those with disabilities, as well as families with strollers and others looking for a welcoming entry into nature, a chance to explore a more secluded forest setting, watch for birds and other wildlife, and experience the beauty of a healthy Michigan forest,” says Colin Hoogerwerf, communications specialist with the accredited Land Conservancy of West Michigan. “When people are able to observe and experience nature, they have the opportunity to deeply care for it.”

The 76-acre Anderson Woods Nature Preserve is a quiet, undisturbed forest located near the shores of Lake Michigan. It is an ideal nesting and feeding habitat for migratory and resident songbirds. Once owned by the Anderson Family, the land was protected by the Land Conservancy in what Vaughn Maatman, the Land Conservancy’s former director, calls “a very successful project, a wonderful example of community conservation.”
From the outset, the Land Conservancy was interested in creating a universal access trail on the Anderson Woods property. The site was entirely flat, which meant the idea could work. Staff members met with the Department of Parks and Recreation. They learned that very few recreational opportunities existed in the area for people with disabilities. The Anderson property could provide a much-needed solution.

To begin to explore the idea, the Land Conservancy called Disability Network West Michigan, a statewide organization that was thrilled to participate. “This was a unique project—different from other Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) trail projects—because we got the veterans involved in designing the trail so that it met their needs,” Maatman says. “It wasn’t the Land Conservancy doing it ourselves. We worked with groups to determine what their people needed. There was an exchange back and forth.”

The Anderson Woods project illustrates the kind of synergistic learning that occurs when different organizations come together around a shared goal. As the groups brainstormed about how to create a universally accessible trail through the woods, the veterans suggested calling an asphalt company to complete the job. Land Conservancy staff explained that a petroleum-based surface could not be put down in an ecologically sensitive area. The solution was a substance called “crusher fines.” The crushed rock or limestone screenings compact well and provide good drainage, and they are suitable for wheelchairs and strollers on an outdoor trail. This kind of teamwork taught the veterans about conservation, and it taught the Land Conservancy about the disability community and its needs.

“It was a learning project,” Maatman says. “We were engaging with folks who had a whole different perspective than we had ever thought about before, a perspective that included accommodating ambulatory challenges, vision impairments and families with children in strollers.”

Steven Knox, adjutant for the Disabled American Veterans, Chapter 11 in Muskegon and veteran’s counselor at Disability Network West Michigan, wanted to get veterans involved with trail construction. “Once we had begun discussions, I realized this was something veterans could do. If they were going out to walk, they could go out to work. And because of what I do, I had a lot of people at my disposal.” Indeed, Knox had a group of about 20 veterans with disabilities that he tapped to mark off trails, clear brush and help in a variety of other ways.

It turned out that building the trail was far more expensive than the Land Conservancy thought. Once again, the partnership between the Land Conservancy and the disability community proved to be fortuitous. When the Land Conservancy wrote grant proposals, Disability Network West Michigan drafted letters of support, and the response from funders was overwhelming. Five foundations lined up to support the project, and a sixth foundation simply
wrote an unsolicited check to be a part of the effort.

“As we began to describe to funders what the project was and who we were doing it with the whole thing really caught on,” Maatman says. “We were creating something in West Michigan that didn’t exist anywhere else. It was not just for able-bodied hikers. This made a real difference to potential funders.”

Conservation of the Anderson Woods Nature Preserve was a great example of community conservation because it involved thinking differently: seeing conservation as something that could extend to the entire community. “We have learned that community is broader than we thought. People with disabilities and mobility impairments are just like us; they want to get out into the woods, too,” Maatman says. “This kind of work opens up possibilities in terms of how we think about conservation for the future.”

Rob Aldrich, director of community conservation for the Land Trust Alliance, agrees. “One in five Americans has a disability. Collaborating with members of the disability community to connect with the land is something that land trusts could do more of that fits within their current missions.”

Veterans will likely embrace such a partnership. According to Knox, “There are a multitude of veterans who would help with ADA trail-building projects, especially to help out other veterans.”

What’s important to remember, Maatman emphasizes, is that community conservation will look different depending on the project and the community. “The Anderson Woods project happened and was successful because some people came together around an idea that animated them and they were willing to learn from each other. Community conservation is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is as unique as the community a land trust encounters.”

One of Maatman’s favorite memories from the Anderson Woods Nature Preserve dedication day is when he encountered a couple of veterans in their motorcycle garb, standing by a bench that they had helped build in someone’s garage. They were explaining to trail users how and why the bench had been constructed and who did the work. “It was a contribution they brought to the project, and they were proud of it. It was the result of a few vets thinking about what they wanted so that they and their friends could enjoy that trail. The Land Conservancy’s vision needed to be shaped by the veterans’ vision and excitement. We needed to make room for their contribution. That’s community conservation.”