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A Conversation With: Jan Syrigos

Married couple teaches conservation through music

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When Jan Syrigos thinks about conservation, she hears music. Jan and her husband, George Syrigos, travel across the Midwest to teach children the importance of preserving the natural world. Jan first started performing for children while working at the Missouri Department of Conservation in Jefferson City. The department produced videos of her performances for their education division. “That was a great way to introduce kids to nature and a lot of nature themes,” says Peg Craft, friend of the Syrigos and video producer for the department. Now, 17 years later, the Emmy Award-winning duo has released two albums of nature-themed songs and continues to inspire children through WildHeart music.

What is WildHeart music?

Our mission is to bring the heart of the wild to the heart of the child. So we use music as a tool to share about nature with children and families.

Why do you think it is important to teach children about conservation?

My grandfather and my parents were very much involved in nature, very much early conservationists, before it was popular. I just feel that I have that responsibility to pass that on. I’m not “hug every tree,” but I am about being good stewards with what we have, protecting it and seeing it continue. I think it’s important that we leave that legacy for our kids.

Why did you start writing nature songs for the Department of Conservation?

I did the educational program for them. For instance, I did a program on reptiles. And then at the end of my program, I just felt like, “How much do the kids go home with? How much do they remember?” So I would do a recap and use some songs to review the concepts.

What inspired you to record your first CD, Critter Rock?

My supervisor at the time suggested it. She brought that to the educational division and said, “Let’s think about this project.” After some thought and budgeting considerations, they thought it would be a good idea. Then we began the process of recording.

How did you get George involved?

He was working with the Department of Natural Resources at the time. George and I had always been a duo for other things like church and weddings. Eventually he became an employee with the Department of Conservation, and then we would do the gigs together.

What was it like to win an Emmy Award?

That was awesome. It was a regional Emmy, so it’s awarded in the eight-state area, and the awards were in St. Louis. We called it the “Over 40 Prom.” We got all dressed up and got to be there with a lot of fun and talented people. It was a great opportunity.

How did the award help WildHeart in the long run?

It was the Department of Conservation's product, so the honor really goes to them. But it gave us more credibility.

What is in store for the future of WildHeart?

I for sure think we'll do one more CD, and then we're just going to see where we go from there. We've been traveling the area, and we're not sure how far we're willing to go. We also do a camp for kids (in Meta). It's called Wild Camp. Three weeks out of the year, we try to do a week of unplugging from electronics and just getting into outdoor skills. We teach archery, fishing, shelter and fire building, those kinds of things to get them back in touch with nature. The traveling and music is one part, but also hands-on experience we provide helps to get the kids to practice what we're preaching.