Protecting The Land We Love: ACE Internship with the Land Trust for Tennessee

With every return to Sewanee, I fell more and more in love with Tennessee. The Volunteer State has a plethora of wonderful attributes but one in particular that drew me, and certainly countless others, back time and again: the sheer natural beauty that radiates across the state. There could have been no better organization for me to spend this past summer with than the Land Trust for Tennessee in Nashville. The Land Trust is “driven to protect public and private land to benefit all Tennesseans now and for generations to come.”¹ In essence, the nonprofit focuses on the treasured places, the special places, the “fabric of our state.”² With my own passion for the innumerable special places of Tennessee, I found the Land Trust to be a highly fulfilling place in which to learn and work. There I was tasked with meaningful projects that contributed to the greater goals of the Land Trust. Foremost of these is the Land Trust’s commitment to protecting Tennessee lands forever.

Forever is a powerful word, and likewise the work that the Land Trust does is a powerful exemplar of land conservation. The Land Trust is a multifaceted organization with the bulk of the organization’s work focused on conservation easements (CE). When an individual places a conservation easement on his or her land, the CE limits the development rights. Instead those rights are typically donated (sometimes bargain-sold) to the Land Trust to hold in perpetuity. The individual continues to live on, maintain, and enjoy his or her land, but there are restrictions regarding the building of additional structures or other actions that would drastically change the landscape. In this way, large swaths of land are protected as open and undeveloped in perpetuity. The Land Trust for Tennessee plays a particularly fascinating role not only as an organization at the forefront of conservation, but also in protecting highly developable land as the Nashville

¹ http://landtrusttn.org/about-us/
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metropolitan area’s growth rate remains at more than double that of national growth. Additionally, as tax incentives for conservation easements have changed – for the better! – CEs and projects have increased exponentially for the Land Trust. The organization has protected well over 100,000 acres throughout Tennessee since 1999. Without the Land Trust, the beautiful Tennessee landscape we have come to know and love would look drastically different; in place of rolling farmlands, streams, forests, natural habitat, and well-placed urban greenscapes would be an endless barrage of development.

As the Land Conservation and Legal Intern, I was fortunate for the opportunity to work on a broad spectrum of projects. The most valuable skill I learned this summer was how to work in a variety of capacities while prioritizing projects in a way that was both efficient and allowed for my 100% effort and attention to be given to each. The largest project I had was with the Conservation Easement Property Binders. In each of the 150+ binders I created baseline reports detailing property transfers, updating the tax map numbers using the Tennessee Property Database and coordinating these with the GIS maps, updating landowner contact information using Salesforce, and compiling and organizing annual monitoring reports. My other main projects included compiling and editing the first draft of a new employee manual, extensively researching wetland mitigation and creating a memo on eleven different mitigation options for the Land Trust, updating the contacts lists of surveyors and appraisers, researching the complex and contentious real estate transfer tax fund and legal documents associated with the new legislation, assisting and facilitating the gratitude event for Land Trust volunteers, helping host a book signing benefit event at the historic Glen Leven Farm where I also processed book sales using SquareUp, assisting with the organization of Land Trust Board orientation binders,

3 http://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2016/05/01/how-many-people-really-moving-nashville-every-day/83100468/
creating a memo for the Land Trust President, editing photos and creating prints from a highly successful Land Trust event to celebrate outgoing and founding Land Trust President Jeanie Nelson, designing photo books for Mrs. Nelson and the head of the event, researching a variety of topics including conservation easements, tax law, historic preservation, conservation tax incentives, and more. The variety and depth of these projects hugely broadened my skill set, allowed me to work with different people around the office, and challenged me in a very positive and rewarding way.

Conservation work is imperative to our ever-growing and changing world and I feel grateful for the opportunity to learn about it so extensively and work in this sector in such a meaningful way. The Land Trust for Tennessee is a leader in the field of conservation and this opportunity, made possible by Sewanee alumni, Career and Leadership Development, and the Land Trust is one I will forever be grateful for. This summer gave me an enormous knowledge base and measurably extended my skill set in the field of land conservation. As I prepare for grad school this fall and my master’s program in environmental policy I feel especially thankful for this time at the Land Trust to continue such fantastic professional growth.