$1 Million Gift Kicks Off Ridges Sanctuary Capital Campaign

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A botanist’s poor eyesight led to a $1 million dollar lead gift to kickoff a $3.5 million campaign for a new interpretive center for The Ridges Sanctuary in Baileys Harbor.

The campaign, titled Bringing Nature to Life, and the $1 million gift from the late Chester Cook was announced by Executive Director Steve Leonard. Cook, a longtime member of The Ridges, contacted Leonard shortly after the organization purchased the Sandpiper property in late 2011 to discuss the gift.

"Chester and I talked many times before and after the purchase of the site," said Leonard. "He was passionate about The Ridges and believed in the importance of the project. When we secured the land, he felt that the vision was on its way to becoming reality, and he very much wanted to be a part of that because of his personal connection to The Ridges and to the man who served as the catalyst for its founding."

Cook’s connection to the place began serendipitously in 1935, when, at age 17, he was hired as a driver by Albert Fuller. As the Milwaukee Public Museum’s curator of botany, Fuller was studying and inventorying the unusual plant life in "the range light 40," as the area The Ridges now occupies was once known, a reference to the Bailey's Harbor range lights that were designed to guide ships through the shoals of Bailey's Harbor more efficiently than the traditional lighthouse.

In this special place, Fuller documented 30 of Wisconsin’s 45 native orchids and all but two of the state’s evergreen varieties, as well as flowers such as fringed gentian that had disappeared elsewhere.

"Some counties in the nation," Fuller once said, "would spend millions of dollars to reproduce artificially what nature has formed at Baileys Harbor."

But due to poor eyesight, Fuller required a driver to take him from Milwaukee to Door County. That is where 17-year-old Chester Cook entered. Hired as Fuller’s driver, he also became his assistant in the field and witness to Fuller’s tireless advocacy for the preservation of this precociously bountiful chunk of land.

When Wisconsin’s first land trust was established in 1937 to protect the original 40 acres of The Ridges Sanctuary, Fuller used it as the model for other conservation efforts during his 60-year career, and it inspired Chester Cook.

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Cook married, moved to California and became a successful businessman. He never forgot the opportunity Fuller gave him and the lessons he learned at his side. Fuller, he said, taught him that it is possible to change one’s circumstances, to make a difference and to leave the world a better place.
More than 75 years later, his desire to honor his friend and mentor resulted in his lead gift for the construction of The Ridges new interpretive center.

"In honor of their relationship, the spirit of possibility it represents and in accordance with Chester Cook's wishes," announced Leonard, "the building will be named the Cook-Albert Fuller Center.

"Now we are reaching out to the community and beyond to ask for their support. We hope people will give what they can to this important project and help us secure the future of The Ridges for generations to come."

To date, almost $2.4 million has been committed to the Bringing Nature to Life campaign. The organization needs to raise the remaining $1.1 million by the fall of this year in order to meet the construction timetable and break ground in the spring of 2014. For more about the campaign, visit RidgesSanctuary.org.