

Wally Wood Award, 2010

The FLTC Recognitions Committee, with the approval of the Board of Managers, awarded this year's highest annual honor, named for our founder Wallace Wood, to Annette Brezicki. Annette has done her best in the last few years to reverse the normal trend toward endangered species status for Foothills Trail Club, her aging Buffalo-area hiking club that has tended over 100 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail System since the 1960's. Oh, she is not by any means a typical organization person; she won't sit through a board meeting, or accept an officer position. Rather, for a handful of years the club went without a President because Annette refused the title while performing all the duties anyway! Instead she relies on her own brand of unflagging energy to infect others and suck them into the vortex of the Annette tornado.



Foothills members were dying off and those remaining weren't spring chickens, either. Most of them felt little allegiance to the larger trail system, either FLTC or NCTA, and trail care was becoming renowned for its absence.

Four years ago the FLTC decided to devote one of their "Alley Cat" work weeks to a segment of Foothills' Conservation Trail long known as the "dreaded Holland ravines," because for a few miles the trail gradually climbed across a steep hillside riddled with frequent steep stream gullies. Hopes were high that this project would make Foothills members feel more a part of the bigger picture than they had for years. Initial planning for what turned into a THREE-year project came from experienced FLTC trail people like Lynda Rummel and Howard Beye, while Annette began the long process of bringing as many club members as possible into the project, including many who had never thought of themselves as trail workers before.

During weekly hikes she began finding out who was potentially interested, and chatting up the rest. She learned quickly that the best way to get a volunteer was to ASK them directly, either face to face or on the phone, to do something specific. This is far different from an email to the whole group asking for general "help," which is so easy to ignore. She grants that it took more effort at the beginning, but produced so much better results. Sometimes she would even ask somebody to do something she could do faster herself just to get them involved. People actually love to be asked, she swears.

The other half of that equation is that people also love to be thanked. She makes sure every name gets in the newsletter, thanking them even for the tiniest jobs, because they love to see their names in print, too.

As a result, a bunch of people who knew each other only superficially became much better acquainted, and even friends. Dozens were involved at all levels, from cooking meals for the group (they stayed at a local recreation center) to building stairs, involvement to the point that anybody NOT playing a role during these three week-long projects felt like they were missing something.

New (and younger!) people became much more intimately involved with the club, while new talents were discovered. Now Annette knows whom to call for what task, and the talent pool is much deeper than anyone had known. Newer members Quinn Wright and Frank Occhiuto barely knew each other before, but now they have become perfect building partners, while Quinn was inspired enough to volunteer to coordinate all future Alley Cats and building projects for the entire Finger Lakes Trail! Mike Schlicht was unearthed as a highly skilled technical trail builder with lots of experience. Who knew?

Best of all, a lot of women who used to whine “I can’t do that!” learned that they could. They saw Mary swinging a pulaski so were inspired to try themselves, and pretty soon realized they could do much more trail work than merely painting blazes. At the end of the day, Annette was tickled to see women really pleased with their own work, and of course, she herself has always been an inspiration in this regard. Her section of trail, no matter what the rest of Foothills' trail looked like, had always been renowned for its tidiness.

Dinner every evening for the whole crew was provided by other volunteers, although Annette let each volunteer decide whether she wanted to do it all herself or recruit a squad. While many Alley Cat crews have had to cook their own meal at the end of the day in previous years, having a good meal to enjoy without work is genuine luxury for the crew.

Organizing talents appeared, too. Years two and three were planned by local members, with David Potzler and Mike Schlicht showing great promise in trail design, staging work, and arranging materials for stairs and ladders where required. Club members arranged a place for the crew to stay in a nearby village and even helped locate funds.

In the meantime, Annette had been steadily inviting club members to “bigger picture” trail events so that Foothills could start to feel part of the whole trail system. A large contingent of Foothills members started appearing at all of the FLT spring and fall weekends, social outings organized by good old Annette; they even came to the NCTA annual wingdings at both Clarion, Pennsylvania, and Cazenovia, NY. Foothills hosted two of the FLT fall campouts over the last half-dozen years at Allegany State Park, very enjoyable events which further cemented member bonds with one another and with the FLT. Okay, so she cannot control snow, but otherwise we hear that Annette was a primary organizer for these events, too, and practiced the same clever tactics at getting club members involved.

And now? People who came to the first Holland ravines project from their separate cliques have remixed their social clumps and know each other much better. Now Annette can contact people to help on other things with no resistance to overcome. By now, a general email to the group DOES work, often bringing a dozen people out on a weekday!

In addition, she has offered to go with any new trail steward their first times out to help get the trail in good starting condition and to provide pointers. This unsung work in the background did wonders to ensure a successful start for many a new steward. Furthermore, at 67 she often offers to help older stewards keep their trail sections up to par, since they hate to give up the "job" but begin to need a little help. In other words, Annette has been the catalyst that helped revive an aging club into an active organization with some new members, and she has done it with persistent, face-to-face enthusiasm that almost nobody can resist