

Lakeshore Earth Day Celebration empowers West Michigan for 17 years

When you think of Earth Day, does a celebration come to mind? Well, Grand Haven area resident Leslie Newman and other founders of the Lakeshore Earth Day Celebration have been celebrating this important event for 17 years.

Leslie's journey with the environment began with having a children's garden at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens in New York City, where she lived years ago. She told me she has always been greatly interested in the natural world, and when she retired from social work and teaching, she knew that advocating for the environment would be her next step.

When asked how the celebration got started, Leslie says, "Three people come to mind: Jean King and Pam Park had the first event in our area in Spring Lake at Christ Community Church, and Connie Widdis, a recently retired GVSU teacher, brought her vision of a community-wide event to a meeting of Wetland Watch, in about 2006 or 2007."

Wetland Watch is a group that first began meeting in 2002, when citizens became concerned with plans for development in Petty's Bayou in Spring Lake.

Others who have played an integral role include Yvonne Olmstead, Patti Baldus, and Jan O'Connell, development director for the Michigan Chapter of the Sierra Club.

"I became involved in the Earth

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Michigan lakeshore communities."

Leslie took part in the very first Earth Day, held on April 22, 1970, and was celebrated by millions in the U.S. She says those who were watching our world saw the pollution of air and water by factories and the clearing of land across the U.S. The annual event is now celebrated by billions in many different ways in 192 countries, according to the official global coordinating organization, EARTH DAY.ORG.

"So, the concern has grown, and science has proven that the earth is warming," Leslie says. "The purpose of the Lakeshore Earth Day Celebration is to raise the consciousness of people in our community to find personal and community climate solutions."

Getting people to organize and participate in the celebration was not an easy task, but through small events and finding committed

Day Lakeshore Celebration about eight years ago," says Jan, "to educate and encourage citizens in the community to become aware and involved in making the important energy decisions that needed to be made to keep Grand Haven one of the most beautiful West

volunteers, the popular annual event is bigger and bigger and now nearing two decades. From this experience, Leslie says she has learned some lessons.

"Many hands make light work, that our community is deeply interested in the environmental care of the Earth, and that learning can be fun," she says.

Why was Grand Haven chosen as the home for the Lakeshore Earth Day Celebration? According to Leslie, "We envisioned the event to include the Tri-Cities and have expanded to include the Lakeshore from Holland to the Muskegon area. The Grand Haven Community Center, now known as Central Park Place, has been our location and is centrally located along the Lakeshore, which works best for everyone. We have had a Green March to start the celebration for many years. The basic rule for whatever we do is to avoid using fossil fuels."

For someone who wants to get started helping environmental efforts but doesn't know where to start, Leslie suggests coming to the celebration.

"Look at all the booths and organizations, find a volunteer, have a chat, list what you learned, and find where your special energy and gifts can go," she says. Sponsors provide financial support for the event, while Wetland Watch serves as its fiduciary and also offers a children's activity during the event

to teach about wetland functions. Visitors can also learn about beekeeping, electric cars, and so much more.

According to Leslie, "If we can take from the past that there are always people who come forward to create a community event to protect the Earth, we have a rosy future with new ideas and activities."

Jan is hoping young people are drawn to the event. "Looking to the future I would like to build on what we have achieved so far and to see more involvement of youth in this event and in the decisions moving Grand Haven to become a sustainable community which is so important to their future," she says.

The Lakeshore Earth Day Celebration takes place on Saturday, April 20, with the Green March starting promptly at 12:30 p.m. Participants should be at the Ottawa County Courthouse parking lot by 12:10 p.m. for the lineup of the march. The rest of the celebration takes place at Central Park Place from 1 - 4 p.m. Leslie thanks the West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC), the Michigan Chapter of the Sierra Club, and those bringing their electric vehicles to the celebration - she is happy to have them all aboard!

For more information, check out the event's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/EarthDayLakeshoreCelebration>

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