

Take a Closer Look!

Meet Five of Region IV's 2009 Award Recipients!

Peter J.F. Stobie, CHI
Region IV Awards Chair

Master Interpretive Manager

Niki Schmutte

Laporte County Parks

Nominated by Laura New

Niki Schmutte has been employed with the LaPorte County Parks in her present post of Chief Naturalist since March of 1994. Niki has been a key player in developing a fledgling Park System into one of the finest in Indiana. Today the County Parks oversee seven park properties totaling over 600 acres of parklands of which four are major developed parks. Niki's contributions have been many in the success of the preservation of this open space for the citizens of LaPorte County.

Niki demonstrates a mastery of interpretive techniques, site and staff management through successfully managing a full-service nature Center at Luhr County Park that includes the design and assistance in construction of all educational displays in the facility as well as a bird viewing area outside the Center. Niki plays an integral part of park planning and is always willing to assist whenever asked. She supervises one full-time and several part-time staff and a multitude of volunteers for work at the Nature Center, Park Programs, and Special Events. Niki produces quarterly the County Park newsletter, *Naturally Speaking*, as well as the newsletter for the Environmental Education Association of Indiana, *CREED*. Niki has worked relentlessly with volunteers, groups and organizations to accomplish her tasks. She produces the lion's share of all printed publications for the County Park Department. Niki also produces the County Park's Annual Report.

Niki worked by herself as the only full-time educator for the Park Department from 1994-2001 and in 2002 she was able to have another full-time educator join her in her efforts. She worked diligently with her staff to accomplish a rather lofty pace of presenting school programs, public programs, special events, and festivals each year. Total Environmental Education attendance from 1994-2001 = 53,392. Total Environmental Education attendance to date = 92,214.

Niki has been the brain trust in delivering the Environmental Education and learning component of the LaPorte County Parks System over the past fourteen years. Niki is very organized; responsible and committed to the projects she takes on. She lives for her job. She is an absolutely fabulous boss. She leads by example and is willing to show, tell and help everyone she touches. She is always willing to offer help when her staff needs it but does not hover. She lets her staff find their own way and respects their talents and skills. She is a positive influence in every aspect of her life.

Niki is well known and respected in many regional and state naturalists amongst themselves and has held and continues to hold several leadership positions in her field. I (Laura) have always and continue to look up to her as a mentor. It is a benefit to work beneath her from her years of service and her skills. We have so much fun working

together and I have become a stronger interpreter from it. She is an awesome naturalist who has accomplished so much. It is people like her that make me want to be the best naturalist I can. Congratulations Niki on this well deserved award and keep having that positive influence.

Sandy McBeath Outstanding Part-time/Seasonal Interpreter

Pam Taylor

Cleveland Metroparks – Brecksville Nature Center

Nominated by Sharon Hosko

Pam has been a part-time naturalist with Cleveland Metroparks for the past four years and was a seasonal naturalist for one year before this. Working four days per week, Pam has made significant contributions to Cleveland Metroparks and NAI's Region Four, and has demonstrated outstanding creativity and effectiveness in the field of interpretation.

Pam transferred to Brecksville Nature Center in May 2007. During the past seventeen months, Pam's interpretive skills and natural history knowledge blossomed. She relates well to all ages, but particularly to early elementary ages. She co-led our summer kid's camp in 2008 and did a fabulous job. Her enthusiasm was contagious and she made each and every child feel special. She designed a really cool camp journal for her kids. Each day they had to write down things, draw what they saw, etc. The journal had a page for a group photo and a page for autographs. The kids LOVED it. Pam's ability to relate our natural world to the lives of her audience is extraordinary.

Pam is committed to interpretation. She is an NAI Certified Interpretive Guide, a Certified Heritage Interpreter and working on her Certified Interpretive Planner certification. She is an excellent role model for NAI and Cleveland Metroparks. Pam made fine contributions to NAI during the past three years. She co-led the registration committee for the 2008 NAI Region Four Workshop in Peninsula, Ohio. She was the perfect person for the committee. She is one of the most organized and detail oriented people. Her computer skills on both Mac and PC are wonderful and she has an instinctive feel for brochure layout. Registration ran smoothly thanks to Pam's organizational skills. Her talents were greatly appreciated by the rest of the workshop committee.

Pam co-led her first Institute of the Great Outdoors (IGO) for Cleveland Metroparks in August, 2008. This Escape to nature program was a week long backpacking trip to Yosemite National Park. Pam's interpretive and organizational skills shined on the trip. The trip was a complete success and Pam had a follow-up potluck where she gave each participant a DVD she made of the trip photos put to music. What a remembrance of their trip. During the trip one night that dipped into the 30's, three lost hikers in shorts and t-shirts stumbled into their camp. Pam recognized that having only eaten snacks and an ipod being their only light source, that two of the hikers were hypothermic and one in advance stages. Without hesitation Pam got her sleeping bag and didn't leave the most severe hiker until he was warm. She talked with him and kept asking questions until he was coherent. They were able to get the hikers to a shelter a half of a mile away and contacted the Park Rangers. Pam's quick action saved the life of those hikers. I (Sharon) could not be more proud of her.

It is a true pleasure to work with Pam. She is a very talented part-time naturalist who will be a fine full-time naturalist one day. She has contributed to the success of Cleveland Metroparks Outdoor Education Division and our region in many ways during the past four years. Congratulations Pam and keep connecting to all of those visitors!

Sandy McBeath Outstanding Part-time/Seasonal Interpreter

Mindy Murdock

Cleveland Metroparks – North Chagrin Nature Center

Nominated by Angelec Hillsman

Mindy Murdock is a part-time naturalist for Cleveland Metroparks, but before this she worked as a seasonal naturalist for several years. Even before joining the park system she exercised her interpretive skills as a teaching assistant at Kent State University. Mindy is a delightful person with a wealth of knowledge and a creative flare. The Cleveland Metroparks are very fortunate to have her. Everything this over achiever touches turn to gold. Mindy was valedictorian of her high school, and then graduated Magna Cum Laude from Kent State University. She then earned her Master's degree from the University of Akron. She is an active member of NAI and a Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG). During her CIG training she scored high on her test and presentation, illustrating her knowledge of interpretation and the ability to create strong themed programs, so visitors do not ask "So what?" Her responsibilities at the nature center range from coordinating the blue-bird volunteers, caring for the nature center animals, creating new cube / bulletin board displays, leading our Trail Tracker program for 4-5 year olds or our Wiggly Worms for 3 year olds and helping with special events. Mindy is extremely creative and artistic. She created a puppet show that is doing very well. Mindy designed and painted the puppet theatre and has written many scripts. Historical Interpreter Hank Mallory and Mindy have teamed up to create some shows that have Hank singing and playing instruments while interacting with the puppets and audience. When not busy with puppets, Mindy is working in a local middle school with 5th and 6th grade art classes to design and create a mural with the students, which is displayed in their school. She also helps the local Middle School students prepare for the Science Olympiad. Students who participate in the Science Olympiad compete with students from other schools to see how much they know about a certain topic. Mindy has coached them on Reptiles and Amphibians. She has also put together a great PowerPoint presentation to help the students get ready for this event. The list of creative programs / projects can go on and on. There's no doubt that Mindy Murdock is committed and passionate about this profession and NAI. Congratulations Mindy! We look forward to seeing you continue your creativity in the future.

Meritorious Service

Susie Edwards

Hamilton County Parks and Recreation

Nominated by Ginger Murphy

Susie Edwards has been a part of Region Four's leadership team for a number of years in several capacities. She is yet another professional who has represented the profession well, represented her agency well, and provided outstanding service to the region in ways that helped us grow and remain a leader in the organization. Some of her service has included:

- Serving as Chair of the Scholarships and Grants Committee for a three year term.
- Participating in NAI Region 4 Strategic Planning workshops and handling a number of the resulting action items.
- Serving on the Ways and Means Committee and serving as the committee's chair for a three year term, PLUS an extra year while we found a new chair. All committee chairs are important in the region. Many of the committees have busy times during the year, but the Ways and Means Committee is busy ALL year. Susie managed the reprinting and sale of our interpretive booklets – she helped grow a relationship with Acorn Naturalists that was established when Maria Peacock was the committee chair. Susie was also our chair during our work with Dave Kronk on the NAI history DVD. She participated in the contract process, reviewed the drafts and managed all the sales of the DVDs. As Ways and Means Chair, she was also responsible for setting up (or getting someone to set up) and staffing (or recruiting help) the regional sales booth. She was chair during our "mug years" and worked closely with Estelle Brown to get the mugs made, sold and shipped. She had a busy four years as chair and recruited and worked closely with her committee members.

Susie has quietly made outstanding contributions to NAI Region Four over a period of several years. During my term as Regional Director I knew that if I asked Susie for help on a project it would be completed on time and completed well.

Congratulations to Susie a very deserving recipient of this award.

Meritorious Service

Leslie Witkowski

St. Joseph County Parks

Nominated by Ginger Murphy

Leslie Witkowski's organizational skills and enthusiasm for the interpretive profession have benefited NAI in many ways. Leslie has contributed to the sustained growth of NAI Region by:

- Serving on the Training and Member Services Committee, then serving as its chair for a three year term.
- Participating in NAI Region Four Strategic Planning workshops and handling some of the resulting action items.
- Serving as the Program Co-Chair for the NAI National Workshop held in Grand Rapids, MI in 2004. This role required a multi-year commitment that she shared with Dr. Jean Kinnear.
- Serving as the Secretary of Region Four in 2006-2007.

- Serving as the NAI Region Four Membership Chair in 2008.
- Presenting sessions at several regional workshops to provide program ideas and resources for other NAI Region Four Members.

Leslie has quietly made outstanding contributions to NAI Region Four over a period of many years since she attended her first regional workshop in Sandusky, OH (and spent part of the workshop in the hospital!). When she has been asked to assist with a project or committee, she jumps in with both feet – during my terms as Regional Director I knew that if I asked Leslie for help on a project it would be completed on time and executed well. Congratulations Leslie on this most deserved award!