



Debbie Stanley takes a close look at trees on her family farm in New London, N.H.

# Rural Dreams

BY *Laura Jean Whitcomb*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Douglas K. Hill*

For almost a quarter of a century, Debbie Stanley has been helping the Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust preserve the Kearsarge area's rural landscape.

The Stanley family loves their land. They love the scenic vistas from every direction on Burpee Hill in New London, including views of three mountains — Kearsarge in the east, Sunapee to the southwest, and Ragged to the northeast. They love the working Christmas tree farm, the high bush blueberry fields, and the waters of Little Lake Sunapee.

In the 1980s, when land development was on the rise, the Stanleys decided to preserve the landscape they grew up with. In November 1989, when the Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust (ASLPT) was only 2 years old, the Stanley family conserved 30 acres of land on Burpee Hill.

“Peter’s family was the ASLPT’s third conservation family,” says Debbie Stanley, executive director of the ASLPT and Peter’s wife. Some folks might resent their work overlapping their personal life, but not Stanley. She took it as an opportunity to learn the process from start to finish, and pass on her personal knowledge to landowners who were interested in conservation easements to preserve their farms, forests, streams and wetlands. “I understand management, because we had done it. It’s a great thing when talking with landowners. There’s certainly an element

of trust when they work with me.”

## Talk the talk

Debbie Stanley was known around town for her organizational skills. She worked for 10 years at Dr. John Wilson’s office and she was president of the New London Historical Society (1984-1987). When the ASLPT volunteer board invited her out to lunch in 1988, she assumed that they were going to invite her to join. “They offered me a job as the executive director for one year, saying, ‘See what you can do,’” she recalls.

The plan was to give the trust five years. The group started with a wish list of 11 properties in New London that were really important to the community.

Today, the ASLPT is one of two accredited land trusts in New Hampshire. It represents 12 towns in central New Hampshire and currently

manages 10,000 acres of conservation agreements. Of the 11 original properties on the wish list, six have been conserved, two were unfortunately developed, and three are still possible. But 114 more properties have been saved

from subdivisions and asphalt parking lots, and the nonprofit organization is celebrating its success with its 25th anniversary in 2012.

“A lot of people had their doubts. Even the board gave it five years,” says Stanley. “But at the end of the first year, we had enough money to sustain the organization.”

Stanley is also celebrating a milestone: 24 years as executive director. It’s unusual for a person to be in that position for that length of time; seven years is the typical average for a director

of a nonprofit organization. But Stanley continues to educate landowners and the general public about land conservation with her friendly demeanor and positive approach. “I love my work,” she says. “When I drive around this region, it is nice going by these properties and

know that they are conserved. I feel like I’ve made a difference for today and tomorrow.”

The Stanley family — all 21 of them — continues to do the same. With a second conservation easement >>>>

“Land can be food for our bodies and currency for our souls. We can harvest timber for the things we build and wood to heat our homes. Land provides habitat for the creatures we share this place with and cleanses the water we drink. Land nurtures the imagination of 7-year-old children and is a living history for them to discover.”

— *Peter Stanley*

## By the Numbers

The ASLPT has protected:

- Nearly 10,000 acres
- 120 properties
- 7 miles of shore, including 4,700 feet frontage on Lake Sunapee

in September 2002 that protected 11.6 acres and a third in January 2009 that conserved 38.5 more, the Stanley Family Farm Association has preserved the land that has been in their family for 145 years.

**Planning for the future**

The conservation easement — see sidebar for definition — is only part of the ASLPT process. Stanley and her team — including two land protection specialists, an operations manager, a development associate, an administrative assistant and a bookkeeper — are making sure that the nonprofit is financially healthy. Why? “We’ve made a promise of stewardship,” says Stanley. “ASLPT will watch over these lands forever.”

The promise to watch over the lands is just that: the ASLPT monitors all easements to make sure that everything is done in compliance with the conservation agreement. Take, for example, the ASLPT’s largest easement: Star Lake Farm in Springfield. This working farm

**What is a conservation easement?**

- Permanent restrictions on land use as a result of a legal agreement between landowner and ASLPT.
- The landowner retains ownership to property.
- The landowner can sell or bequeath property.
- Terms of the easement are flexible and tailored to the property and landowner’s particular situation.
- Restrictions become part of the deed and bind all future owners.
- Easements must provide a public benefit (not necessarily public access).
- The ASLPT is the enforcement agency.

For more information, read the handy Q&A section online at [www.ausbonsargent.org/questions-and-answers-about-conservation-easements](http://www.ausbonsargent.org/questions-and-answers-about-conservation-easements)

produces hay and pasture for 50 to 100 head of cattle, provides wood products to local mills (under the supervision of a forester), and includes a sugar house. “If a typical farm wants to build a barn, they just go to the town office to get a permit,” describes Stanley. “But under the conservation easement, Star Lake can build a barn, but can’t run electrical lines. The barn has to be solar energy operated to leave the conserved land intact.”

Other properties, such as Evergreen Point, have different requirements. “Evergreen Point, which was bequeathed to us, has to stay forever natural. Nothing can be done to it, and there’s no public access,” says Stanley. “It plays an important role to the health of Little Lake Sunapee, acting as a runoff buffer for Newport Road.” It’s also a sound buffer; Stanley notes that when you are out on the lake, you can’t hear the 50 mph traffic

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from the busy New London road.

Right now, the ASLPT is supported solely by 1,100 members and donations; there is no government funding for operations. And forever is a mighty long time. Stanley estimates that a \$2.5 million fund will sustain the organization and provide 20 percent of ASLPT's operating budget in the future. Membership dues, the Annual Preservation Fund, grants and gifts make up the balance of the operating budget.

"After 20 plus years getting to know the land and the people in Ausbon Sargent's region, Debbie provides a deep resource of knowledge and relationships that are invaluable to the organization's success," says Beth McGuinn, land protection specialist. "Debbie has developed a thorough understanding of land conservation over her time with



Stanley points out a conservation tag.

Ausbon Sargent, but it is her instinct for business management and fundraising that has made this a successful organization."

In the coming years, Stanley hopes that more people will support the ASLPT. "Join. Be a member," she says.

"Volunteer — every time we have a new property, we need more volunteers to monitor it. Contribute: be an easement donor, or recommend someone."

It's an easy nonprofit to support — who doesn't like the scenic vistas of New Hampshire? But, more importantly, "we've made a difference. That's what I love. The land will always be there and comfort you. We'll have local farms with fresh food. We'll have renewable energy, like wood," Stanley says. "We'll have all these good things, forever." 

*Douglas K. Hill relocated from Athens, Georgia, to Grantham, N.H., with his family last November. He has worked as a commercial photographer for over 20 years, specializing in architecture, advertising, and professional portraiture. He enjoys traveling on assignment and is looking forward to living in, and establishing his business, in the northeast. To see a sampling of his work, visit [www.doughillphoto.com](http://www.doughillphoto.com)*

### ASLPT History

In 1987, property values in New London were escalating. The Town Conservation Commission asked for an increase in its annual appropriation at the 1987 town meeting, and was denied. But the selectmen put together a committee — a representative from the budget committee, planning board, conservation commission, a local realtor and a state legislator — to conduct a study on land preservation.

The group concluded that a private, nonprofit land trust would offer quick response, flexibility and confidentiality. It would also have the ability to fundraise. It was named the Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust after Ausbon Sargent. Sargent was a retired maintenance worker who used his life savings to purchase a 3-acre parcel of land from Colby-Sawyer College, then donated that land in 1985 to the Town of New London on the condition that it remain forever undeveloped. Today that parcel is the New London Town Common.

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