

CHATTANOOGA *Local History Bicentennial Riding (2002)*

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STAFF PHOTO BY TIM BARBER

Stephen O'Neil, holding a great-horned owl, is the new executive director of the Chattanooga Nature Center.

Stephen O'Neil takes helm at Chattanooga Nature Center

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BY SUSAN PIERCE
STAFF WRITER

Within a span of 11 months, Stephen O'Neil has evolved from a board member of the Chattanooga Nature Center to interim director, then executive director.

"When Jenni Veal decided to step down from the position to become a full-time mom, the

board asked if I would step in as interim while they conducted a search for a new executive director," said Mr. O'Neil. "Although I was already familiar with the center, during the interim, my interest and love for the place seemed to grow stronger. It wasn't long before I recognized this position would be a dream job because it combined my interests of environ-

mental education, land stewardship, animal husbandry and innovative programming. After only a few weeks on the job, I asked the board if they would consider me for the position."

"We had over 40 applicants for the job and interviewed five finalists, but Steve really came out on top," said CNC

(over)

board president Kristina Montague. "In the two months he was interim, he proved himself. He obviously has a great background in environmental work, has been an entrepreneur so he knows the business side of things, was very enthusiastic about the job and we felt confident about his relationship with people around town."

His previous experience with high-profile environmental agencies, EarthWatch and Ocean Arks, prepared him to oversee the 24-year-old center. His global awareness was heightened during a year spent in Ireland.

Two years ago, Mr. O'Neil was one of 16 people accepted to a master's program at Trinity College in Ireland. Selling his home in Chattanooga, he moved his family to Dublin, enrolled the children in Irish schools and lived in a circa-1700's town home.

"The experience was not only wonderful for the entire family, but it gave me an important perspective on global environmental issues. The U.S. is, by far, the largest consumer and richest country on the planet. I believe that this special standing in the world obligates the country to lead by example. As in politics, all issues are ultimately local ones. We're starting right here

Stephen O'Neil

- **Age:** 39
- **Hometown:** New York City
- **Education:** B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, master's in environmental science from Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.
- **Family:** He and wife Michelle have three children.
- **Previous employment:** Most recently executive director of SouthWings conservation organization based in Chattanooga. He has also worked for EarthWatch, LightHawk and Ocean Arks International.

at the Nature Center."

The center will begin Eco-Tours, which will offer outdoor adventure-seekers sea kayaking in the Florida Keys or hiking the Grand Canyon with naturalists.

"Also, we are having an interesting lecture series starting early next year on topics ranging from wildlife identification to the Federal wolf reintroduction program," said the new director.

"He has come up with some innovative programming to bring people out to the center," said Mrs. Montague.

Building upon an established children's program, the center will "be building a new educational pavilion, offer summer hayrides, have outdoor summer movies, more camps and activities," said the director.

While the director said the nature center enjoys "one of the most faithful and supportive memberships" he has known, he wants to include more members in that 1,000-plus roll.

"Those who know about us feel we are the best-kept secret in town. While that might be a romantic notion, my goal is to expose anyone who might be interested in the Nature Center to the many facets of our organization.

"Minutes from downtown you can see almost 1 percent of the world's surviving red wolf population. On any given day you see turkey, deer, raccoon, hawks, herons and more. That is pretty amazing to me.

"The center is bustling with schoolchildren most every day, many of whom have never been in the woods. That energy rubs off on you. It's a wonderful experience to be able to show children something they may never have seen before. It's almost like seeing it for the first time all over again.

"During late afternoons, between meetings and tasks, you can catch the most magical light that spills across Lookout Valley and this, in its own reflective way, is inspiring. Every now and then I can catch the howling of the red wolves. It's a great reminder of why we're here."

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