

Woman on a mission

First Earth Day turned Christine Esposito into a lifelong advocate for conservation

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BY SUSAN DIBBLE

Since founding Terracom Public Relations 20 years ago, Christine Esposito has drawn national and local media attention to a variety of environmental organizations and their missions.

Her behind-the-scene advocacy has won her numerous honors, including the 2010 Grassroots Conservation Leadership Award, presented by Chicago Wilderness Habitat Project.

The Lombard native's passion for the environment was sparked when the first Earth Day was observed in 1970. Esposito was a member of the ecology club Teenagers Opposed to Pollution at Jackson Middle School in Villa Park.

Club members joined in a national effort to draw attention to Mother Earth by holding a teach-in at a local elementary school. Using a baseball analogy, Esposito talked to the younger students about nature vs. pollution and what it would take for nature to win.

She never forgot that first Earth Day experience.

"The first Earth Day did have a huge impact on me," she said. "I was excited to be participating in it."

Esposito's interest in the environment continued to grow in high school as she helped organize cleanups of the Illinois Prairie Path. She and her friends often rode their bikes to the Morton Arboretum in Lisle to explore.

In college, she joined the Students for Environmental Conservation and helped launch a paper recycling program in the dorms at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Esposito graduated with a bachelor's degree in music, but decided to pursue landscape architecture for her master's work. She spent one summer as a gardener at Morton Arboretum learning about the plants she was tending.

By the time she finished her master's, Esposito knew her real passion was communicating about the environment. After gaining publications and marketing experience, Esposito became the first director of public relations and communications at Openlands, an agency dedicated to protecting open and natural spaces in northeastern Illinois.

Jerry Adelman, executive director of Openlands, said Esposito has continued to work with the organization on a variety of projects since leaving to start her own company in 1990. She has helped make public agencies aware that Openlands can provide interim financing to help them purchase natural areas to preserve, he said.

"Because she is mission-driven, she cares about the outcome," he said. "She's made a real difference in land preservation and conservation in our region."



Christine Esposito, president of Terracom Public Relations, visits the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, a place she often biked to when she was a teen growing up in Lombard.

Mission with a vision

Esposito said she launched Terracom - terra meaning earth or landscape and com referring to communications - because she wanted to help other environmental groups fulfill their mission.

"The reason I started Terracom was to affect positive change," she said.

She started with two clients, the Chicago Park District and the Great Lakes Protection Fund. She has worked with about 50 green nonprofits, government agencies and businesses since then, many of them on a long-term basis.

Based out of her Chicago home, she is still Terracom's only full-time employee and brings in other partners as needed.

Her recent Grassroots Conservation Leadership Award was for her work in publicizing the biannual "Wild Things: a Chicago Wilderness Conference for People and Nature" hosted by the Audubon Chicago Region. Nearly 800 environmental experts, volunteers and nature lovers attended in 2005, double the number Audubon hoped for that first year. The 2009 conference drew more than 1,000 participants.

Esposito, who did much of the conference publicity on a pro bono basis, said she was particularly pleased to receive the award because it usually is given to people doing hands-on conservation or environmental work.

She helped another client, a tree-care company, grow from \$8 million in revenues to \$53 million over 18 years, she said.

Scott Jamieson was the chief executive officer of the tree-care company before it sold. Esposito played a key role in the company's growth by connecting them with other partners, as well as by publicizing the company's services, he said.

"As much as she's a public relations person and a green person, she is a business person," he said. "She always was a very strategic partner."

Since moving to Bartlett Tree Experts a year ago, where he serves as vice president of corporate partnerships and national recruiting, Jamieson has brought Esposito on board there. Bartlett - an international company with area offices in Naperville, Northbrook and Lake Barrington - wants to increase its exposure in the Chicago area, he said.

Principled approach

Esposito said she doesn't accept as a client just any company or organization that claims to be green. When one company proposed to build a mixed-use development to LEED environmental standards, she politely declined to represent the project because it would be constructed in a river floodplain.

"I look for organizations that share my vision," she said. "They're almost always cutting-edge, innovative."

But committed to the environment as she is, Esposito is also a realist.

"We're all on this continuum," she said. "Nobody is sustainable 100 percent. Nobody's ever going to be."

Her own environmental practices include recycling, energy-efficient lights, turning down heat, using rain barrels and reusable bags, driving a Prius (no, she hasn't had any problems with it), taking public transit, and biking and walking when possible. She's careful not to waste water when running the faucet and composts her food waste.

"It's so neat to see how much your waste stream is reduced when you compost," she said. "Now my food waste goes into my garden."

Esposito and her husband, Mark Campbell, a native of Glen Ellyn, are the owners of two society finches, a hybrid breed that no longer exists in the wild, and a rescued, retired racing greyhound. They are both amateur bird-watchers.

"I don't go rappelling or anything, but I very much like being outdoors," she said.

Esposito has seen interest in Earth Day wax and wane since that first one 40 years ago that got her started on her life's mission. This year, the anniversary, coupled with concern about climate change, has again heightened Earth Day awareness, she said.

"Ultimately, of course, the goal is to not need a special Earth Day," Esposito said in an e-mail, "that every day will be Earth Day in terms of people's awareness of the impacts of the choices they make."

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