

‘What are you doing for others?’

Greenfield man gets dream job at Mass Audubon



JASON PICARD Jonah Keane, the new director of the Connecticut River Valley Sanctuaries, talks last month in his office at the Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton. He began the job Jan. 8.

BY GENA MANGIARATTI
Monday, February 17, 2014)

When Jonah Keane was working as an environmental teacher for the Peace Corps in Bolivia, he would playfully sing the word “ecología” — “ecology” in Spanish — upon entering his classroom.

At the time, Spanish was not only a second language for him, but also for his students, whose first language was Quechua, the ancient Inca language still spoken in the central Andes region.

One day, he witnessed one of his high school students singing the tune to herself while she was working on homework for another class.

“That had a big impact on me because I saw the level of impact that I was having on these youth and how open they were,” Keane said. “I saw an amazing opportunity to educate and open up young people’s minds to new things.”

This was one of the earliest moments the 38-year-old Greenfield resident can recall that sent him down a career path of teaching others and leading by example. Most recently, this path led him to his position as the Connecticut River Valley Sanctuaries director for Mass Audubon, which he describes as a “dream job.”

Keane began his new job Jan. 8. He said he was drawn to the group by the combined opportunities of being able to provide education and engage with volunteers, all while working to conserve land. He succeeded Mary Shanley-Koeber, who retired last year in September, after heading the Connecticut River Valley sanctuaries for 26 years.

Mass Audubon works to protect natural resources of Massachusetts and to connect people with nature through conservation, education, and advocacy, according to the organization’s website. Its Connecticut River Valley sanctuaries are Arcadia in Northampton and Easthampton, Graves Farm in Williamsburg and Whately, Laughing Brook in Hampden, and Lynes Woods in Westhampton.

Keane’s office is at Arcadia in Easthampton, and his duties include managing a staff of around 10 educators and property managers on the four sanctuaries and overseeing community outreach efforts.

Steeped in nature

Keane moved to the area from Delhi, N.Y., in fourth grade and grew up in Shelburne Falls, where, he recalls, his childhood home was surrounded by woods. He says his interest in the Connecticut River began around this time, particularly after his class at The Center School in Greenfield took an

overnight nature trip to Connecticut. Keane began taking environmental classes as a high school student at Northfield Mount Hermon School.

He left western Massachusetts to attend the University of Vermont, where he earned a bachelor's degree in environmental sciences. He later earned his master's degree in forest ecosystem science from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

It was during his time in the Peace Corps from 1999 to 2002, he said, that being away strengthened his interest in the Valley and directed him to focus his environmental career at home.

"I think part of it is, you love what you know," said Keane. "There's a combination of a lot of educated people and a real community focus, and I think those two things go very well together." He said he looks forward to engaging the students and professors at all the local colleges.

He previously worked for the Student Conservation Association, a national nonprofit that connects students with conservation service opportunities. He worked there from 2004 to 2010 as the director of the Massachusetts program, then took a year off to travel across Asia and Europe during 2011. When he returned in 2012, he became the Northeast Regional Program Director. During those eight years, he directed the association's AmeriCorps programs. AmeriCorps is a federal community service program for young adults that is sometimes referred to as a domestic Peace Corps.

He said his attraction to volunteer work began in college, when he participated in the mentoring program Big Brothers Big Sisters and other local community service opportunities.

"I really started to see how impactful it can be on others and on myself," Keane said.

Patti Steinman, education coordinator of the Connecticut River Valley Sanctuaries, said she believes Keane's connections with community service organizations will be an asset to Mass Audubon's volunteer efforts. She said more than 60 volunteers turned out for a community service event Martin Luther King Jr. Day at the Arcadia and Laughing Brook sanctuaries, and that many of them were brought in by Keane.

That day, volunteers at both sites cleared invasive plant species to create better habitats for threatened and endangered species of birds. Steinman said the volunteers included members of AmeriCorps, Upward Bound in Springfield as well as local residents.

"We certainly do have room to expand, and I think Jonah can bring a different generation of volunteers here," Steinman said. She has worked for Mass Audubon for over 20 years and has been education coordinator for about 11.

Keane said he enjoyed doing the introduction at that event, especially reading this quote by King: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

Keane said he also looks forward to continuing his predecessor's legacy of working to make nature accessible to everyone, noting that a handicapped-accessible trail was built on the Arcadia property under Shanley-Koeber's direction. He said he also hopes to help further Mass Audubon's connections with not only the surrounding towns, but with urban communities such as Holyoke and Springfield.

"I'm excited about working to further the mission here," he said. "There's always more to be done, and I'm just excited to see how we can do more."