



## Land Trust Heroes: Charlie and Joan Katan

By Trish Percival



On warm spring nights, Charlie Katan was known to stand guard on Firetown Road, well into the early morning hours, to stop cars as salamanders crossed the road to mate in nearby vernal pools. Wildlife preservation was a passion for Charlie, and he practiced it in ways big and small.

As a small child, Joan (Ensor) Katan would follow a mounted officer in Brooklyn on her tricycle and sit on his horse during breaks. Although much of her family considered riding too dangerous, her grandfather would sneak her off to riding lessons. So began Joan's lifelong love of horses and the outdoors.

Charlie and Joan met, appropriately, through the Outing Club at the University of Connecticut. Joan, an agriculture major, and Charlie, a horticulture major, quickly discovered they had much in common.

They were married on May 15, 1958, and they purchased a house on a 29-acre parcel of wooded and wild land at the end of Strong Road, in West Granby, Connecticut. It was the perfect spot for Charlie and Joan. They bought some horses and blazed some trails and tended carefully to their personal nature preserve.

In 1972, Charlie became one of three "founding fathers" of the Granby Land Trust. (The others were Dave Russell, who serves as GLT's treasurer to this day, and the late Bill Stewart. The late Bill Pease, a lifetime GLT member, donated his legal expertise.) It was early in the land trust movement, but these men understood how quickly the rural character of Granby could change; and they recognized how important it would be to preserve some open spaces, protect ecologically sensitive areas, and sustain wildlife habitats. We are so grateful to them for their preparation and foresight.

Charlie was not, as you now know, an armchair conservationist. For the next *40 years*, in addition to serving as a crossing guard for salamanders, Charlie worked hard to raise money, contact important landowners, lead hikes and work projects, provide wise counsel to the board, and serve as an effective spokesman for the Land Trust.

For many of those years, Charlie also served as the widely respected chairman of Granby's Inland Wetlands Commission. That role, combined with his academic training, gave him a nuanced understanding of Granby's most sensitive habitats.

Meanwhile, through the 4-H, Joan started teaching horseback riding lessons on their property, which Joan's students named "Happy Horse Hollow." Many children and teens learned to ride with Joan. "Our goal," said Joan, "was to learn excellent horse care and horsemanship, and to respect and enjoy the animals."

Her students say she taught them so much more – she taught them how to communicate with and care for animals and love and respect the natural world. She taught them the meaning of hard work, the importance of a job well done, and the value of perseverance. She helped them develop self-confidence and build resilience. Teens who resisted cleaning their rooms would gladly muck out a horse stall.

Charlie enjoyed working with the students, as well. Together, they would take the kids on field trips to museums, hiking trails and concerts. Joan's students loved the Katans. They were mentors to many, guiding them through childhood, adolescence and beyond.

Here's proof of the influence Joan and Charlie had on these young people: 25 years later, Joan became sick and was unable to give her animals the care they deserved. A group of Joan's former students came in from California, Texas, Washington, D.C., Connecticut, and Massachusetts to help. They did barn work and groomed the horses for a full week; and at the end of the week, they agreed they had never had a better vacation. "One never really knows what will come of one's efforts," said Joan. "I am very grateful."

In 2017, the Granby Land Trust bestowed its highest honor, the *Mary Edwards Friend of the Land Trust Award*, on Joan and Charlie, for their years of dedication, their stewardship of the natural world, and the example they were to others. Due his declining health, Charlie could not come, but Joan was there. As she rose to say a few words of appreciation, she said "I can't fill Charlie's shoes." Then, with a smile, she said, "But I am wearing his socks!" Proudly, she pulled up her pant legs to prove that she was.

The Katans had long planned to leave their beloved farm to the Granby Land Trust and in 2019, that is exactly what they did. The property anchors the southern end of a string of preserved lands running north to Mountain Road. For Charlie and Joan, it was an intimate gift of their most cherished asset. They had nourished and trusted the Land Trust for almost 50 years and knew that the organization would carry on the conservation values that were so central to their lives. The farm will forever be known as the *Katan-Ensor Preserve*. Now, decade after decade, the Land Trust will serve as the steward not only of the Katans' land, but also of their story. We will celebrate them, their legacy and their generosity forever, as they so richly deserved.

