

## **Center's Director Named Region 6's Top Interpreter**

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Ask Pat Silovsky, director of the Milford Nature Center, about an award she received and the last person she will talk about is herself.

She will talk about the great woman who nominated her for the honor. She will talk about how important it is to connect with nature. She will talk about the excellent staff she has at the nature center.

Then she will feed the prairie dogs.

But, it is this commitment to her job and ability to connect with others that helped Silovsky get recognized in the first place.

Silovsky recently received the 2009 Distinguished Interpreter award from Region 6 of the National Association of Interpretation. Interpretation in this sense refers to connecting audiences with resources that can be natural or cultural. For example, re-enactors at Colonial Williamsburg would be interpreters as would individuals who run museums, zoos or nature centers.

NAI is the professional association for these individuals. It promotes connecting people with their cultural or natural heritage and the stewardship of resources. Region 6 of NAI includes Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana.

Silovsky has been involved with the organization for about 20 years. She has helped with its regional and national workshops and has even nominated others for awards through the program. In the mid-1990s, Silovsky nominated her employee, Lisa Cole, for an outstanding new interpreter award.

"Lisa was always one of the gold standards here at the nature center," Silovsky said. Cole received the award. This year she returned the favor and nominated Silovsky for the Distinguished Interpreter award.

Having been selected as the regional award winner, Silovsky is eligible to receive the national level award. Her nomination would just have to be forwarded to the national level. If she wins, Silovsky would get the award at a national conference in November.

Whatever happens at the national conference, Silovsky already finds her job rewarding.

Her favorite part of her work is connecting people with nature and the wildlife of Kansas. "When somebody gets it and their eyes light up, it's really rewarding," she said.

She especially enjoys the elementary school children who visit the center. "The children especially enjoy it, so it's really fun to work with little ones," she said.

That is just one part of the job Silovsky has enjoyed in her over 20 years with the center. She started as the first director of the facility in 1989.

However, this profession is not what she was expecting while she was a graduate student at Pittsburg State University.

"I didn't leave school thinking I was going to be in this field. When I left school, there really wasn't a defined field for this. When I was in college, that really wasn't something I was exposed too and I was going to do," she said.

Though she didn't plan on it, her career evolved from her school work and what was happening in the graduate student office.

"We had all these critters running around our office, so people starting asking us to bring stuff to classes," she said. "It was really haphazard, but that led to doing more formalized things and finding out there were jobs at nature centers."

In addition to her work at the center, Silovsky is a regular contributor to Kansas Wildlife, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks magazine, and is the editor of OnTRACKS, a newsletter published several times a year for teachers.

She was recognized as the 1996 Conservation Educator of the Year by the Kansas Wildlife Federation. In 1998, she received an award for Outstanding Interpretive Program from NAI.

Silovsky's interpretive work can be seen at the nature center from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. The facility is closed weekends from October through March. Admission to the facility is free.

At the facility, visitors can touch native animal furs, print their own animal tracks and see dioramas on area wildlife. Live animal exhibits feature snakes, amphibians, turtles, lizards, prairie dogs and more. Outdoors there is also a large bird of prey exhibit and a bobcat display.

"We really focus on Kansas because that's where we are. Zoos can focus on wildlife in other parts of the world. We fill that little niche about wildlife that's right here," Silovsky said.

Milford Nature Center is located at 3415 Hatchery Drive.

For more information on the nature center, call 785-238-5323.