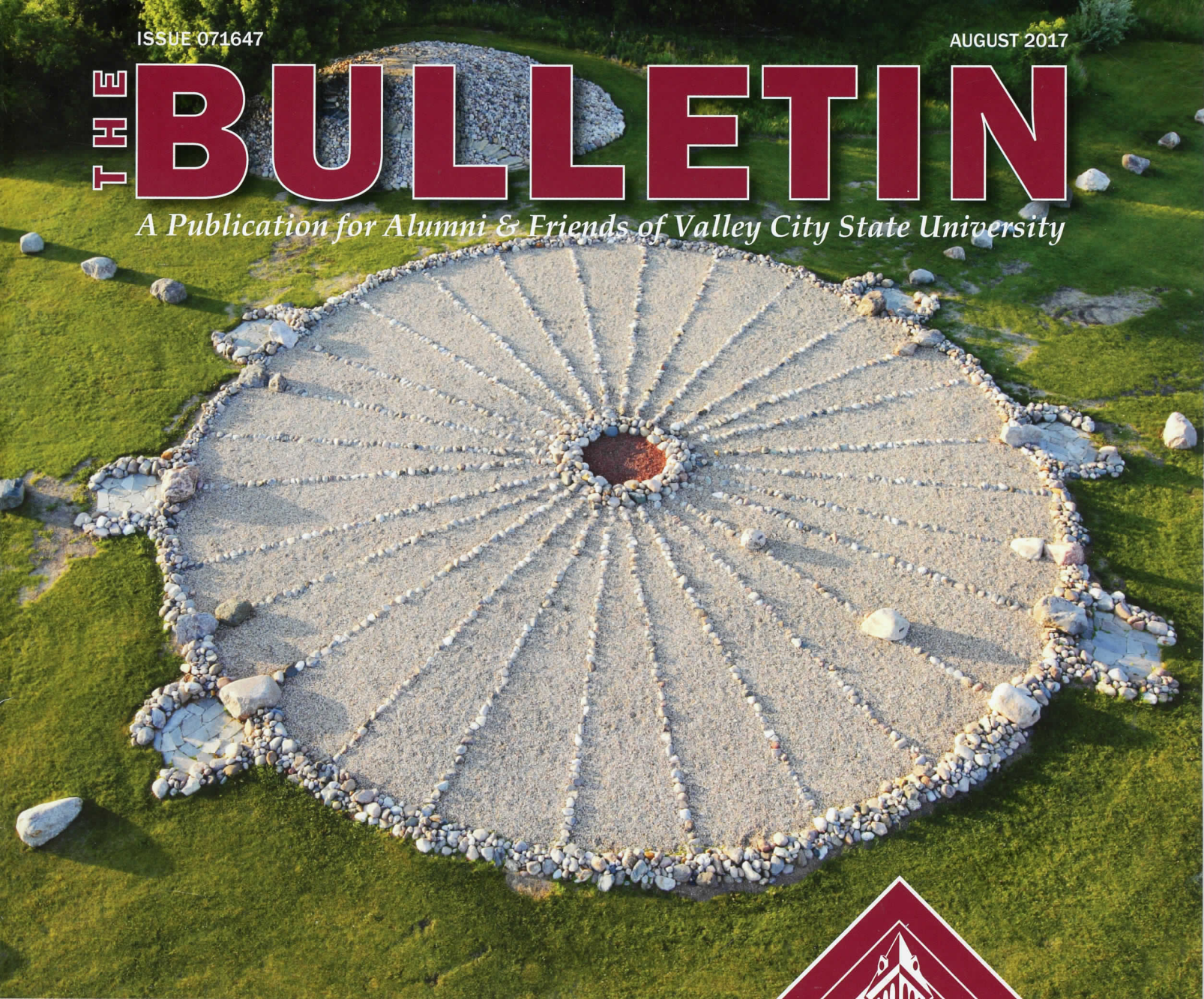


THE BULLETIN

A Publication for Alumni & Friends of Valley City State University



VALLEY CITY
STATE UNIVERSITY

Medicine Wheel Park Strengthening connections to the universe for 25 years

Nathan receives DSA ♦ Commencement 2017 ♦ Heckaman serves in N.D. Senate





MEDICINE WHEEL PARK

Strengthening connections to the universe for 25 years

The brainchild of Joe Stickler, VCSU professor emeritus, Medicine Wheel Park has enjoyed its lofty perch on the hilltop above the central campus for 25 years.

Celebrating 25 years

The park traces its beginnings to the efforts of a fall 1992 VCSU astronomy class taught by Stickler, but the formal celebration came a bit early—it was held during Rally in the Valley Weekend on June 17, 2017, to ensure that Stickler was part of the party.

(Those who know Stickler and his partner, Diana Skroch, professor emerita of music, understand that the retired pair typically travels and camps throughout the western U.S. and Canada from roughly the 4th of July through Halloween annually.)



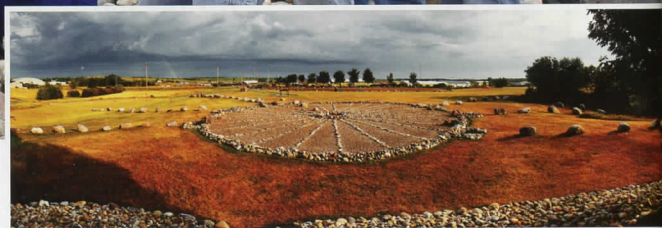
The 25th anniversary celebration brought together a group of people who had helped and supported Stickler in executing an ever-expanding vision that has resulted in the multi-faceted park we enjoy today.

Organized by Mary Lee (Peterson) Nielson '79, the gathering was “typical Medicine Wheel”—Stickler explaining the various elements of the park to visitors, leading them in some tai chi exercises and chanting to help further their connection to the universe, and smiling families and individuals (along with a few dogs) enjoying the presentation, the wheel, the calendars, the planets, and the walking paths.

Beginnings

The park has humble beginnings, starting with no funding and relying on donated labor, materials and equipment. At its founding, it was just an idea in Stickler's mind that has blossomed full-blown into a unique place, one which has garnered regional, national and international publicity and recognition for Valley City.

In 1992, Stickler and students in his VCSU astronomy class staked out some lines and laid down a few rocks. The execution and the vision were limited—a circle of rocks with six spokes, and as Stickler readily admits, really no expertise—but the wheel was there, and his vision, like the universe, kept expanding.



The Park Now

In the 25 years since, that original solar calendar—now 213 feet around with 28 spokes—has been augmented incrementally with a meridian calendar, a solar system model along a paved trail (the Path of the Planets, part of the North Country National Scenic trail), and a perennial garden (the Garden of the Sun), all highlighted with the help of five interpretive panels.

Part of the VCSU campus, the park is more than just the 11 or so acres on top of the hill. Now totaling about 30 acres—a 2003 designation by then President Ellen Chaffee made the park official—it also includes the woods below it, where trails meander through the north-facing riparian hillside to make a connection with the main campus.

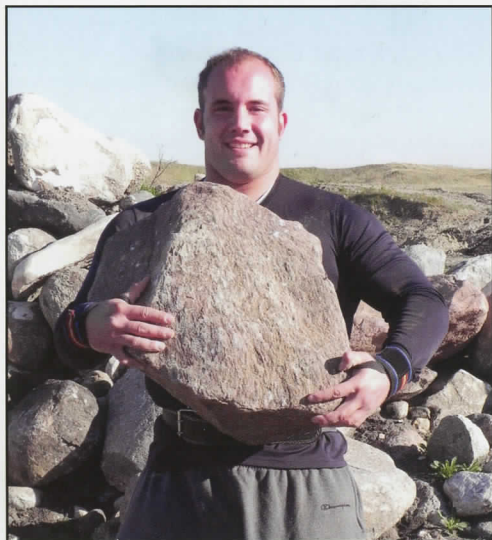
Where It All Began

Stickler's mother had planted the seed for the wheel during his childhood by recognizing solstices and equinoxes when they came around, and later, without formal training in the cosmos, Stickler, a chemist, went on to stargaze and teach astronomy at the College of Ganado in the Navajo Nation in Arizona before coming to Valley City.

Stickler had heard and seen photos of the Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, but his vision began to coalesce upon his arrival at Valley City State in 1981.

He toured the future park site with science professor Stephen Greenwald, who told him of the American Indian burial mounds there.

Joe Stickler and Diana Skroch relax on a bench at the park.



Matt Barba '12 did some heavy lifting at the wheel in October 2010. (Strong muscles sometimes come in handy when volunteering at the park, but they are not required.)

Vestiges of the mounds—hidden within a general area that had served many functions over time, including a golf course, fairgrounds, playing fields, track, and asphalt plant—captured a place in Stickler's heart and mind.

Conversations with Valley City friends Gail and Dennis Pederson '81, who thought they had remnants of a medicine wheel on the Pederson family farm along the Sheyenne River, reinforced Stickler's idea to build the wheel.

The prime site for the wheel was threatened when it was discovered that the City of Valley City owned an acre in the middle of the university property—it had been the site of a water tower at one time—but a perpetual lease signed Aug. 30, 1993, eliminated that awkward hurdle a year after work had commenced.

Rocks and Physical Labor

If you have been to the park or seen photos of it, you know that much of the work in its creation and evolution involved rocks—finding them, hauling them, placing them. Student and community labor made that happen. Volunteers would bring rocks when they came to work at the wheel, and Stickler organized “rock expeditions.”

A 2003 memo from him categorized the student volunteers under two lists labeled “students with trucks” and “students who know where rocks are,” and they were given the following instructions:

“Find rocks for Medicine Wheel Park. This year we are collecting rocks from the size of a large softball down to baseball size. Some head-sized rocks can be used, also. Please deliver them to the rock pile at the west end of the parking lot at the Park. Please focus on gathering round-shaped rocks, not flat ones. When driving around the area looking for rocks, you can always stop and ask if you can take some rocks.”

Blumer Construction Co., located across Winter Show Road from the park, contributed boulders. National Guard payloaders and operators also played a role, as did VCSU facilities staff Willis Wagar, Don Schaack, and Ron Pommerer, among many others. Anyone with a skidsteer was more than welcome to join in!

Apart from the machinery-aided work, the physical part of developing the park fell mostly on the arms and shoulders of Stickler and student volunteers. There have been hundreds of volunteers over the years, including Nick Faure '12 (now a dentist in Minot, he put in more than 300 hours as a student), Matthew Nielson '06 (now a science teacher at Valley City High School, he brings his students to the wheel for stargazing and other astronomical field trips), and Garth Weber '12 (among the most active volunteers in recent years), to name just a few.

Grants and Support

Park development has been spurred by more than just manual labor. Grant proposals were written and submitted; funding requests were made to municipal organizations; local officials were engaged to support the park. Valley City community stalwarts such as Jan Stowman, Bobby Koeplin, the late Roy Sheppard, and Mary Lee Nielson were among the leaders who pitched in and made things happen.

More than \$100,000 in funding came to the park from 1991 to 2001, including multiple grants from National Recreational Trails (through the North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department) and grants from the Valley City Food and Beverage Tax Fund and the Valley City Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Funding from these sources helped shape the park as we know it today, providing for the creation of the paved trail and interpretive signs.

Significant ongoing support has also come from the Friends of the Medicine Wheel, a group of supporters who contribute to funds administered by VCSU. Stickler cultivates the group and keeps them apprised of park progress and plans with annual letters.



Alice (Janisch) Beauchman '73 has provided much support for Stickler and Medicine Wheel Park.

Through the years, Stickler has also relied heavily on Alice (Janisch) Beauchman '73, administrative assistant in the Science Department. “She has been invaluable,” says Stickler.

MEDICINE WHEEL PARK

1992

YEAR WORK
BEGAN

213

WHEEL
CIRCUMFERENCE
(IN FEET)

28

WHEEL
SPOKES

30

ACRES

\$100,000+

FUNDING
FROM
1991–2001

2017

TWENTY-FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY



Recent Changes

A gift of about an acre of land—the sloping hillside on the south of the park—from AgCountry Farm Credit Services in 2011 enhanced the garden area of the park. The Garden of the Sun, which draws help from the Sheyenne Valley Garden Club, includes lilies, sedum, dame's rocket, and more, including milkweed patches for the butterflies.

Recent park additions include the Rings of Saturn, created by Stickler's former student Charles Bowen. A Valley City welder and artist, Bowen fabricated the metal sculpture addition to the boulder marking that planet along the Path of the Planets.



The Rings of Saturn, created by Stickler's former student Charles Bowen.

Events and Gatherings

Over time, Medicine Wheel Park has served as a site for family gatherings, weddings, memorial services, solstice and equinox celebrations, Earth Day events, stargazing, research, and school field trips, along with American Indian drumming, singing, dancing, and more.

Ice luminaries have been used to decorate the wheel during the winter solstice celebrations, and a blessing ceremony was part of former president Steve Shirley's inauguration festivities in September 2009.

Along with the important volunteer work they do (Stickler is quick to point out the added value of community service on a résumé or graduate school application), students use the park for research and course work.

It's also a popular site for K-12 field trips, often combined with a visit to the VCSU planetarium in Rhoades Science Center, frequently hosted by Wes Anderson, planetarium director and avid wheel enthusiast and supporter.

Participation in group presentations and attendance at wheel gatherings number in the hundreds annually; sometimes there have been more than 1,650 attending in a year, and those figures don't include the countless individual visits to the park.

The park pulls people off the interstate to see the unique attraction, and it provides an interesting, dog-friendly picnic site for visitors and locals alike.

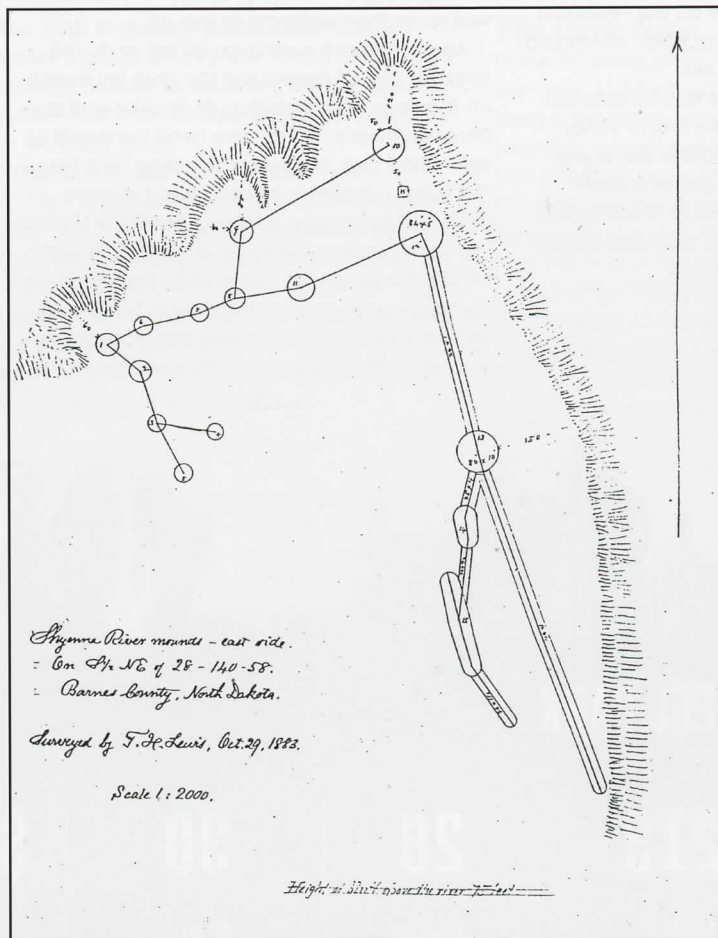
Sacred Ground

Although the park is quite utilitarian in nature, Stickler urges us to not forget the sacred nature of the park grounds. The park brochure describes its spiritual purpose this way: "The Medicine Wheel is a multicultural symbol celebrating the calendar discovery process by our intelligent human ancestors around the globe and honoring the presence of the Native American burial mounds immediately to the east."

The Indian mounds there were first surveyed by T.H. Lewis on Oct. 29, 1883, as part of the Northwest Archaeological Survey, funded privately by Alfred J. Hill of St. Paul, Minn. Human remains have been repatriated in the park in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

In respect to the native traditions, many American Indian individuals and groups have performed at the park, including Mandan-Hidatsa storyteller and musician Keith Bear, the Mandaree Singers, Lakota Thunder, and the Buffalo River Dancers and Singers.

Speculation has even linked the park site to a definitive battle between Ojibwe and Cheyenne in 1740 that drove the Cheyenne out of the area.



T.H. Lewis's original 1883 drawing of the Native American Burial Mounds located east of the medicine wheel.

Stickler and Community

An engaging and intellectually demanding instructor over his 30-plus-year VCSU career, Stickler received the Teacher of the Year award four times—in 1991, 2004, 2008 and 2013. But it is Medicine Wheel Park that well may be his legacy in Valley City.

Contrary to what his appearances in the wizard costume might suggest, Stickler is a humble man who recognizes that he didn't create the park alone—countless hours of volunteer effort by VCSU students and community members alike, along with financial and grant support from a host of entities, public and private, have gone into the park—and it stands today as proud testimony to what a collective effort can accomplish.

He's been quoted as saying "The Medicine Wheel is a community effort, many have contributed. No other community has something quite like this. Its existence creates community." And that's what makes Medicine Wheel Park a very special place in Valley City.

For more information, visit medicinewheel.vcsu.edu, or better yet, visit Medicine Wheel Park itself. (You'll feel connected to the universe!)

- 1) A group of student volunteers unload rocks collected for the wheel.
- 2) The Buffalo River Singers and Dancers from the Fargo-Moorhead area have performed several times at Medicine Wheel Park.
- 3) Perennials are featured in the Garden of the Sun.
- 4) Ice luminaries graced the wheel at a winter solstice celebration.
- 5) Steve Olson, Don Schaack and Kevin Klein, then members of the VCSU facilities staff, pose with the sign they created for the park.
- 6) Stickler in his wizard costume presides over the June 20, 2016, summer solstice celebration.
- 7) Some of the first student volunteers in 1992 included Karla (Lura) Richards '97, Jeffri Jones '96 and Wayne Triebold '95, among others.

