MS: Alright, so I would like to know a little bit about your experiences, throughout your life, of being in nature, being outside, playing outside – you know – as far back as you want. And kind of getting your story of how you ended up here at Wintergarden Park.

CS: Um… there’s a lot of places I could go with that. I know as a child, I obviously, I played outside a lot. We lived in the country. I can remember as a kid, you know, walking up and down the country road and squeezing the little touch-me-not plants and they would explode. I remember climbing trees with my brother. I also remember my mom locking us outside the house at which point we were obviously spending too much time inside and were on her last nerve. So yeah, so I remember just having free reign on, we had like six acres. My dad had a separate garage that he was always working in on weekends, tinkering and doing stuff like that. Yeah, I remember, some of my experiences, things I remember… I remember as a kid thinking it was really awesome, at the time, and now, as a parent, I now realize what my dad was up to, but he paid me a penny a dandelion to pick the dandelions out of the front yard. So a) “it was fun, I’m just picking dandelions, and I’m getting paid”. Really I think he was just trying to keep me out of his hair a little bit. But those are some of the things I remember from my childhood home.

I do also remember when I was really little, when we moved there, I think I was there or four, like an early early memory, there was this field of flowers. And now I know that they were some sort of non-native just weed, but to me it was this whole field of little red and yellow flowers. And I just remember running through down the little hill and through the flowers like, you know, this is where we live now, this is awesome. So I’m not sure how much of these memories, like that one, are real or it’s perceived from pictures I’ve seen. I remember some awesome snow forts and… I don’t think it was the one they’re all talking about now, what is it – the storm of ’78, the blizzard, because I would have only been three. But I do remember my dad would plow the snow and then we would carve out little caves and tunnels to play in there. What else do I remember about my childhood and my house?

The killdeer. We had two really long driveways. It was kind of like a Y-shape. And if the killdeers nested on one part of the driveway, my dad would block it off so nobody could drive that part of the driveway. We would have to use the other entrance and exit to get to and from our house, but I remember trying to sneak up on the killdeer and just watch them… the moms do their little flutter and fly off and stuff like that. I remember my dad showing me which ones were actually the eggs and which were rocks.

When I go home now, there’s a really awesome tree that my dad planted when I was little. And it’s huge now. It’s this huge beautiful buckeye tree, you know. It has a swing in it for my niece and nephew and, I don’t know. When I did my graduate work here, at BGSU, I actually did some research on connecting kids to the land. And one of the things I read a lot, uh, on about 20 years ago was like what does it take to make someone go into the field like this. And at the time there was a lot of research showing that, like, there was like two main factors. One was a lot of time spent (fire crackle distorts sound) outside as a child and I said “hey well no wonder I like all this stuff.” And then the other one was some sort of mentor or experience or something, some other guiding factor, like either an adult or, like for me it was 4-H. So I grew up, I wasn’t… I-we didn’t have any farm animals, but I did the sewing and the cooking and hung out with the other – my other friends who were all farmers. But my summer – like I lived for camp, going to camp. And so a lot of my childhood memories are also based on 4-H camp in central Ohio.

The first year after I graduated from high school I spent a summer working at a Girl Scout camp for the whole summer, which was down in the same central Ohio neck of the woods. So yeah, basically living in cabins or platform tents for the entire summer. By then I was pretty sure I wanted to go into some form os Environmental science. And that’s what led me to – I was originally going to go to Ohio Northern and then I had started dating my husband at the time, in high school and he was coming up here [to BGSU] for a teaching degree. So I finally got over my fear of a big college and decided to come here so I could also be with him, and fell in love with the environmental studies program here. And, uh, one thing led to another… I’m trying to think, focus on my childhood, I’m not going to get distracted. Let’s see. Yeah I might have covered most of it.

MS: When you were in your college studies, undergraduate, graduate, or both, did you spend a lot of time either in Bowling Green city parks or learning about BG city parks?

CS: Um… not so much the city parks, but one of my early field trips I remember going to Oak Openings and they were teaching us about restoration and things like that. And I was with a friend, and they [Toledo Metroparks] were trying to open up a savanna, which entailed killing some trees in order to get sunlight to the forest floor to have that habitat matrix. And I just felt so empowered like I am helping nature, you know, and my friend, who is still one of my best friends to this day, she was with me and she was like “Cinda, you’re killing a tree”, like (distortion) I’m sawing and I’m saving the savanna. She was like “you’re killing a tree” and I was like “I’m saving a savanna.” So we’re arguing about this because, for her, she couldn’t get over the hurdle of looking at the bigger picture. She was like, this is a tree and this tree is special. And she gets it now. It’s not like she didn’t get it, she just physically couldn’t... she just couldn’t or wouldn’t. And she ended up going into, working for the UAW and going more that route, more social justice sort of stuff. But she did her, she was an environmental science major, too. But it’s just interesting, you know. We both.. and she’s the one who taught me how to camp. Like I knew how to camp because my parents sent me to a camp as a kid, but we did not camp-camp.

We took a vacation every year. We went somewhere, usually the east coast. We hotel-ed it the whole way. But we saw really cool stuff. We tend to… my father liked to focus on history most of the time, like the Civil War. So we did Gettysburg, Williamsburg, and all the -burgs, and Boston. But then my senior year of high school, we did out west, which he had done before having children. But that obviously had an impact on him, like I could tell. He loved traveling, so that one vacation a year was a really big deal. But, so we went out west as a family and did the corner-to-corner of Wyoming and Colorado. So we saw Mount Rushmore and the Tetons; Pikes Peak; Kody, Wyoming; and that was really cool…. Like.. Oh! And Yellowstone, which was phenomenal, you know, just to see it. And that was right after the catastrophic fires of the late ‘80s, so it was kind of cool.. you could see the regeneration from the fires. And I’m sure, you know, as a high school student I’m sitting and doing deep thoughts about this as we’re like driving around Yellowstone and saying hi to the bison.

MS: Do you think those types of experiences, of being able to see the impact of the fire on this whole system or, you were talking about in your field trip realizing that, sure you might be cutting down one tree but you’re saving a savanna; do you think that type of whole-systems, larger picture helped you or continues to help you in the work that you do here?

9:36 - CS: Yeah, definitely. Because, you know, we have to make decisions on a daily basis that are, for a lack of a better term, playing god. You know while tinkering out here. Sometimes I refer to myself as the flower tinkerer, you know, because the overriding goal is biodiversity. So trying to find a way to fit as many plants into the park as possible, you know, or do we focus on that or do we, you know, focus on the rarity or unique? Or, how much energy do we put into just making sure we have a lot of the common, regular stuff. So a lot of it’s about balancing and trying to, cause, you know… we started with a mosaic of habitats here, and there was a lot going for this place, but there was also a lot missing. So in my early days here, I would literally drive the countryside looking for seeds in the ditches. And then getting those plants here and harvesting then them here and continuing to make that population spread. But then there were things that were here historically and we can look at some of the historic lists, you know, and you can’t find them anywhere in the country… so I have to… genetically, the biologists want us to try to stay as local as possible, but then there’s also the point at which, after 15 years, I can’t just sit around and find a small population of a certain rare plant to try to help protect it in the park, I have to… I work with Toledo Metroparks to bring things in. And I’ve gone as far away as Wisconsin and Cleveland to try to, you know, source certain plants.

MS: So I think that anyone that comes to Wintergarden or does a program with you here or elsewhere about the park or about restoration knows that: 1) you have a lot of really valuable information about the land, about restoration, the ecosystems, the historic ecosystems of the are; but also that you care a lot about this place. I think that comes through in the way that you interact and tell the story of the park, but how would you characterize your relationship to this place?

12:09 - CS: Hm… I feel like I’ve become closer to it. I mean I’ve been here pushing like 19 years now so I’m hitting like two decades. And I’ve gotten, you know, I spent the first couple of years getting to know the park and figuring out what was here so that I could take it and move forward with the restoration process and use what I learned while volunteering for Metroparks and the Nature Conservancy and my couple of years working for Wood County Parks. And at first I used to get really frustrated because I felt like we weren’t making enough progress fast enough. And, you know, Chris would be like “chill, we’ve got thirty years to work on this place.” And so… there were times when it felt like we would take a few steps forward and a few steps back. But now after I’ve been here for 19 years and look back on what this place looked like in some places, and how the vision has come to fruition… you know, it’s really amazing. And so my husband and I are currently looking at trying to move next door to the park. Trying to find a house closer because it is, it’s like one of my children, this whole park. And so…. I don’t know…. I do, I refer to it as my home away from home. Kids think this is my home. I have to explain to them that this is a park and this place is owned by everybody in town, I just have the privilege of working on it. Because we’ll be out on the trail and they’ll start to get tired or thirsty and they’ll be like “can we go back to your house now?”, yeah we can go back to the Nature Center.

14:09 – MS: And because you’ve worked so closely with this place for 19 years, what types of changes be you seen over time? Maybe it’s throughout the time, the vision, the restoration efforts through the past 19 years. Or maybe it’s season to season or year to year. What are some of the changes that you see that you think others don’t necessarily see?

14:36 – CS: Well sometimes people do… some of the things I know I see but I don’t know other people see, sometimes or maybe not… we have gotten rid of a lot of the invasive shrubs through the wooded areas. Obviously there’s a lot more prairie grasses out in the prairie. One thing that always makes me stop and think deep thoughts, you know, is there’s certain oak trees out in the meadow where we were going for the melding of the habitats, the transition zone. So, like, we… as the acorns would start making little tiny oak trees out into the prairie, there were certain ones where we would start flagging them and start mowing around them. Or watering them down so they wouldn’t burn when the fire came through. And so there are trees out there that are now 15 year old oak trees that are ginormous, but then I also look at them and think that’s my baby. We nurtured those specific trees, we picked them, we selected them. There’s also a handful of shrubs out there… one of the first things I ever transplanted. And I got the seeds from Steidman Woods, from BGSU, and I grew them and they helped me get the going. And so now there’s these shrubs that are like twice as tall as me. And people go by the wetland and they’re like these are phenomenal, look at all the butterflies on there, and the insects and whatnot… and I’m thinking “I did that, those are my babies.” It makes me happy to see other people enjoying it so much.

16:32 – MS: Do you think that the people that come and say those things and they see this beautiful shrub but they don’t necessarily know all of the work and the tending and care that you put into making it what it is… do you think that they… that they have lost something in that experience because they don’t know?

CS: I don’t think so. I think that for the most part, I mean, the verbal things I get from people is nothing more than lots of sincere appreciation. Every once in a while somebody will critique our methods for our madness. But we’ve had less and less of that over the years. Early on there was a lot more educating people because it was like my friend, “you don’t kill a tree period.” That whole leave it alone, let nature take its course, mentality of the ‘60s or ‘70s and ‘80s. What was still somewhat prevalent. But now, usually, if someone comes in when we’re doing something, they just want to know why. And as soon as as give them a short scientific explanation they’re usually fine. Because it think, at this point, people who have been watching the park for 20 years – as users or neighbors… I think we’ve proven ourselves, we have a proven track record. They can see the park has changed for the better.

MS: What have you learned from being out and working with…

CS: Oh I’ve learned so much. I tell students all the time, if I knew… if I knew then what I know now as far as how to go about restoration, cause I was pretty green coming into this. This was my… I had spent a little bit of time volunteering and, like, one year employed…. No, two years, at the county parks. And my focus there was the educational programming, but at the time the county parks was also developing their restoration program. They didn’t have a department yet, so it was just the naturalists doing the restoration work on the side. Now the county parks has like, a complete… at the time there was only three staff doing all of that, and now they have three full-time programmers, and a bunch of part-time and seasonals and three full-time restoration people and a bunch of seasonals and stuff like that. So they’ve grown leaps and bounds knowing that they need to manage and take care of their properties as well. So year when I came here I was very book smart but I was not necessarily hands-on smart and I was still doing a lot of learning. And I felt kind of alone because I didn’t have anyone to draw on. You know what I mean? I had those experiences at Metroparks and every once in a while I’d call somebody up there or, you know, or call somebody at the county parks, you know, “hey, what do you think about this”. But there was a lot of learning curves where we would try something on a specific species, as far as trying to kill it and it would backfire, it wouldn’t die. Just like, well that was a waste of time and energy. But then there were other times where you would throw a bunch of seeds out and you wouldn’t see anything for a while but then a couple years later, a plant would just go “poof! Here I am!” And we would go “oh, my gosh it worked.” And then I would figure out, that plant’s happy place is kind of this soil and this amount of water and this amount of sunlight, so that I could focus my energies taking seeds and transplants there. So sometimes it was just a lot of trial and error, throwing seeds around seeing what grew where or why.

MS: So learning about what are the resources here for the plants that the books don’t say…

CS: Yeah, every plant has got its own mind, is what I’ve decided. So if there’s.. some plants are really easy to restore. A handful of seeds, boom, done. And peoples are just, you know, “that lupine, it’s such a phenomenal plant” and I’m just “yeah, that took no effort. I’m so glad you guys love it”… it was totally happy. If you give it what it needs, which is sand and sun, it will take off and have a mind of its own. Other plants seem to be a lot more picky about being reintroduced.

21:18 – MS: And how does it feel when people come up to you and say “this plant is really beautiful” and it *was* one of the more tricky ones? Is that…

CS: I usually tell them the story. “I’m so glad you like that because that plant really gave me a hard time.” And I just tell the about my experience with that particular plant. And they seem to enjoy it… I guess… They don’t go running for the hills. They make jokes about me being the crazy nature lady here in like 50 years, because I’m pretty sure after I retire I’m not going to go far. Like I said, my husband and I are trying to move closer to the park. I’ve got a very vested interest in this place. It’s not just a job, you know.

MS: Do you see that with visitors as well?

CS: There are some visitors that are very attached to this park, that have been coming here longer than I’ve been here, you know. And they’ve left behind a legacy. There’s a handful of people in town, predominately I can think of several women, who… this place would not exist if they… in the way it does, if they had not led the charge in the ‘90s to start a foundation, add land, encourage the city to hire staff to manage it.

MS: Yeah, because this place has…. Go ahead.

CS: Lots of money has gone into this place privately, not just the city. From the city standpoint, we’re one of the cheapest parks as far as to manage. Cause, you know, with all the other parks, you have to take into account all the labor and time it takes to mow them or take care of the pool or to, you know, staff the Community Center. I’ve got the smallest budget but we’ve got the most land.

MS: I think this place and the history of the park, the preserve, really shows that people in the city care about it (Cinda affirms), with the foundation and all the community efforts that we see BG and the surrounding areas coming together to expand, or make this change to better this place and have.. make it a community feeling. So I want to kind of get your perspective on that as well, and… what the roles, or role, is for this type of place, this type of urban park-nature preserve, in a larger context of a community?

CS: Yeah, so a lot of times, especially if someone is new to the community, because half the time I can tell, so why are you in Bowling Green. Are you new to the university? Or a new job? Whatever, and I tell a lot of people when they’re like “This place is awesome. I can’t believe this is here in this little town.” I’m like “okay, well if you like this, make sure you go visit Toledo Metroparks, make sure you go visit Kitty Todd Preserve because this is just a sampling of what was here historically.” Most of the swamp has been turned into farm fields but, you know, just north of the [Maumee] River there are some amazing places you can go to get away. It’s not just all flat and boring. And the Toledo area has done a phenomenal job of preserving, protecting, and enhancing a whole corridor of oak savanna habitat and stuff up there.

MS: And you mentioned going back to the Metroparks and the county parks getting some feedback when you were first starting here, how influential has the Toledo corridor and that model been for your restoration work?

25:27 – CS: Oh, a lot, because it.. you know, I still make sure to… because what I saw at Kitty Todd, the habitats that had been restored, I could see them in my head and then I would look out here and I would be like “okay, how do I make this place model what’s going on up there?” And I could, I would compare plant lists and I would compare how much canopy… I did a lot of research on Wood County specifically compared to the habitats up there. We did have a little bit of a different mosaic here. We had a lot more true tall grass prairie, we obviously had more of the swamp woods and the wet meadows. So try to represent all of those habitats has been a fun challenge, honestly. I mean I could sit and look at plant lists all day and try to figure out plant communities… because when I look out here (pause for Cinda to welcome familiar guests to the Nature Center)…

MS: So you were modeling and comparing plant lists and seeing the things that you could…

CS: And early on, some of the experts from the state came in and they gave some plants lists as far as what things we should target to reintroduce. I still have a Cinda’s “Top 50 Hit List” which I’ve gotten maybe half of the plants, you know… there’s getting a plant to grow and there’s getting a plant to grow as its own sustaining population. So I can put a transplant in and it can live for four to five years, but if it’s not making its own babies at some point then it’s just like… okay, did I succeed or not? Meh.

MS: These things that you have learned from working out here about restoration and how to best allow the land to work with you to restore itself in this collaborative partnership that you’ve created, how do you think other people can start to create relationships with land so they can see “well this plant does really well” or “wait a second, that wasn’t here last year”, what do you think people can do to get to the point where they can see changes?

CS: Well obviously if you have a large chunk of land you can do something with, you can try planting seeds and see what happens. I think if you have a smaller landscape, obviously transplants might be a better way to go. It takes a lot of time to learn all the possible plants that you could put in your yard. But there are some really good sources out there that you can study. If you know you have this kind of soil and this kind of light and this kind of moisture, you can go to certain places. And I know where a lot of those sources are for where you can start, so if anybody is ever interested in trying to naturalize their yard, I’m here as a resource. We want people to use us as resources because I have been trying to landscape natively for a long time and it was a learning curve, learning what plants… you know, some plants put out so many seeds that you dwarf all the other plants you’ve planted so you have to either have the time and energy to cut the seed heads off ahead of time or know what plants to put with what plants and in what quantities. So there is… there’s some really good stuff coming out right now. There’s a woman I went and saw, what was her name, Claudia West, I’m trying to think of the name of the book because I lent it to someone… cause yeah, it’s not as simple as you just go out and start planting natives in your yard and everything takes care of itself and it will look great without any effort. There is some… you do need to.. but there are certain plants you can start with that are easy, and sometimes I can recommend those to people. Like, okay, when in doubt, put in ten plugs of little blue stem and if you have good sandy soil put in butterfly weed and four or five other plants. I know the county parks right now is trying to focus their growing efforts on the most landscape-friendly native plants. They’ve worked really hard on putting stuff back into the parks as well, but from what I understand, they’re really trying to focus on getting good native plants in people’s yard so they do a sale once a year. And that’s where we’ve gotten a lot of our transplants and seed sources from in recent years.

MS: Well do you have anything else you’d like to add?

CS: I can’t think of anything off the top of my head.

MS: Well then, thank you for this, this is wonderful to hear about your story. I hear a lot about Wintergarden from you, but to hear about the steps that you’ve taken and the thing that you’ve done in your personal life to get you hear and the relationship that you’ve made with this land was really neat so thank you.