



Frank Berlin

Passionate About Community

Frank and Nancy Berlin

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

Meeting with Frank Berlin is a story-lover's dream. Full of energy, Frank is always ready to make a difference – whether by saving a piece of nature, educating a new student or just by brightening your day a little by making you smile. He has a lifetime full of interesting stories, filled with characters that instantly spark a writer's creativity. As with any good teacher, he naturally educates as he speaks and his fun personality is conveyed in everything he does. He also knows how to get things done. By the time we met at 9:30 in the morning, he had been out and managed to accomplish more in those early couple of hours than most people do in an entire day.

Born in Bound Brook, New Jersey, he lived with his family above a Pep Boys auto store in Plainfield for the first few years of his life. Then they moved to Watchung, NJ, where he lived until he was 20. Watchung was a small town. His school had four rooms for eight grades and there were only 12 kids in his class up until high school, when they were sent to North Plainfield to finish their schooling.

They also had a lake that provided hours of entertainment. In the summer, the kids lived outside, picking up soda bottles to earn 10 cents a case. They played basketball, softball, fished and hunted rabbits and squirrels. In the winter, they played hockey on the lake. Having so much nature only 27 miles from New York City was a special treasure growing up. It provided a great foundation for Frank's love of nature and his passion for protecting it. Sadly, Frank says the town is now wall-to-wall houses and the stream is all dried up.

Frank is in constant amazement at his success in life. Coming from simple beginnings, he still marvels at where he is now and the experiences he had getting here. Perhaps it is because of this early foundation that he was able to make a difference in the lives of others. An immigrant child, Frank's mother was originally from Germany. She worked as a nanny for an opera singer when she came to the U.S. His father was from Sweden. He became an apprentice on a ship training to be a Danish baker. They met at night school, where they were both learning English. Frank grew up with a "get a job and work hard" mentality. They didn't have

a vacation for 16 years, but he never once felt like he was suffering or missing out on anything. Their life was filled with laughter and friends and all the comforts a person really needs.

Frank worked odd jobs here and there but after graduation a friend of his informed him about an opening on a Garden State Parkway Survey team. It was great pay and he always liked being outdoors so he took the job. He bought a 1949 Ford Convertible to cruise around in, meeting the group at the bar at the end of the day. It was a good life for a young man. He enjoyed the work and it sparked an interest in engineering. But then he had to join the Army and was sent to Fort Dix, NJ for his basic training.

He ended up at the base longer than usual because he contracted pneumonia and wound up in the hospital for 34 days. His friends had moved on to their stations or over to the Korean War by the time he was out. One of his friends came back from the war and warned him about how awful it was. He told Frank to say he knew how to type if anyone asked. When he got out of training, Frank was stationed at the South Park Military Reservation in Pittsburg, PA. When the question did come up, he remembered this advice, and because of his high school typing class he was able to become the clerk typist while stationed at an anti-aircraft battery in Blawnox, PA.

The Army had a provision to allow the boys out a couple of months early for college acceptance. He didn't know if he was cut out for college, but wanted to give it a shot. Not knowing anything about any of the colleges, he decided to apply to schools in good ski locations since he liked to ski. But by then, he was too late with the applications and missed many of the deadlines. He then applied to midwestern schools and received acceptance letters from Purdue and The Ohio State University. He picked OSU, but didn't do well on the entrance exams, so he found himself once again faced with a decision – either take remedial classes first, or go home, take some classes there, then reapply. He was ready to go home but his Captain told him if he went home and back to his buddies, he'll never go back to college. Frank realized the Captain was right and went off to school.

Remembering his earlier job on the Parkway, Frank enrolled in a 5-year civil engineering program. They had to take well-rounded courses, including English, where they learned to write by writing every day. Many of the boys in class were fresh out of the service so they all wrote stories from their military experiences. It made things interesting. Never being much for school in the past, Frank was surprised. "I found out I loved learning," said Frank.



Frank helped place 41 bee boxes in conjunction with Southern Adirondack Honey Bee Association.

"I couldn't believe it! I loved going to school! I was really a student."

Despite loving what he was doing, Frank realized he was not cut out for engineering but he wasn't sure what else to do. During a visit home, he talked to his 8th grade teacher who suggested Frank become a math teacher. "I cried when I dropped engineering," said Frank, but he knew it was something he needed to do. He enrolled in the education college and soon excelled in his new field.

His parents had retired to Florida, so in between his schooling, he lived with his wife's uncle and fished with a man who would eventually become his father-in-law. One day the man's daughter came out with them. "I helped her out of the boat," remembers Frank with a twinkle in his eye. "I became smitten." They planned on marrying when he graduated college. Two days before the wedding, he had a job interview for a position at Shaker High School in North Colonie. The school was beautiful – brand new with wall-to-wall carpeting. They offered him a job on the spot, but he surprised them by saying he wanted to think about it. He had an interview in Goshen, NY the next day.

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and he wanted to check it out. He went to his second interview, this time at more of a city school. He took one look around, walked across the street to a pay phone and called Shaker. "I'll take the job," he said.

Two days later, he and his new wife, Nancy, were off on their honeymoon in Cape Cod. They had no reservations or anything planned, but lucked out and had a wonderful time. Once they returned home, they started on their journey to the Capital Region, eventually settling in Clifton Park. He began his new job at Shaker and continued his studies. He took masters' classes in the summers at Boston College. "Man, did we learn mathematics. Did we BREATHE mathematics. Even every table napkin had math on it!" he says. "Math is all mental – representative. I learned the *why* of math." He continued taking grad courses at various local colleges near home including Albany State, Siena and RPI. He also received two national science grants to take intensive courses at Simmons College and Boston College.

Teaching was obviously meant to be. Even as we talked, he was teaching me and trying to jog my memory of some long-ago math, using scraps of paper we had around to illustrate as we went along. Obviously touched by his own professors, he relived anecdotes of some of his former students and experiences in the classroom himself. He believes that all kids are smart. You just have to find the right way to reach them. One of his special students has since gone on to receive high honors in his life. He requested Frank attend one of the honor ceremonies as the teacher who inspired him at the start of his mathematics education. It was a moment that Frank treasures and he still tears up as he tells how the two continue to keep in touch to this day. Frank may now officially be retired on paper, but it's obvious that the teacher is still working inside him, as he inadvertently touches all those he meets.

Frank spent 32 years teaching at Shaker, growing his own family to three children and four grandchildren. He loves to visit Schroon Lake and the Zankel Music Hall at Skidmore College, calling it the secret treasure of the Capital Region. But his real passion now is directed to preserving the open space and natural resources in our own area. An environmental advocate, he is the president of Friends of Clifton Park Open Space and works daily to preserve the resources that are so unique to the Capital Region. One of his passion projects is helping save the



Clifton Park Junior Girl Scout Troop 2158 learned about nature and ecology while helping Frank install bird boxes and plant wild flowers at the Clifton Park Transfer Station. Not only will their effort beautify the transfer station, it will also help build an ecosystem that supports birds, bees and butterflies. Girl Scouts pictured: Annika, Adama, Katherine, Eliana, Samantha, Selena

honeybees that are disappearing in alarming rates due to pesticide use as well as a colony collapse disorder problem. The project began with an article. "I had read an article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* about a man that was doing research on the type of swarm boxes honeybees prefer. I thought, why not provide a swarm box for honeybees in Clifton Park. I was fortunate to find a gentleman named David Wood, who is now the past president of the Southern Adirondack Honeybee Association. I learned a lot from David and he has been extremely helpful."

They give out boxes every year and have had success in saving swarms from several areas. They're hoping to provide more refuges and to enlist the help of the whole county, as well as the state, in preserving such a vital part of our agriculture. He feels his biggest success, though, is the awareness that people now have about the importance of saving the honeybees from the harmful things we have been doing to our environment. He has a few tips on how to help. "Stop using herbicides that kill the clover and dandelions. Stop spraying herbicides on the side of the road to kill the wildflowers. There is no reason we can't mow them later in the fall. Planting flowers in general are good, but especially let any native flowers come up. We need to look for opportunities to provide pollen for the honeybees. The Girl Scouts scattered 90 lbs. of sunflower seeds down at the Clifton Park Transfer Station. This is their 5th year that they have been creating a meadow for

birds, butterflies and bees and it has been a tremendous success. We have stopped mowing it like a golf course and let nature use it by providing bounty for the birds, butterflies and bees. The girls have done a great job and they are getting awards for what they're doing. We also now have eight bluebird boxes down there and two bat houses."

Open Space is quickly expanding and receiving more support and recognition than they expected. People are interested in protecting their environment and now is the time to act. Frank has several other Open Space projects in the works and is always on the lookout for a new mission to make the Capital Region better and kinder to the environment. He encourages everyone to take an interest in their surroundings. "See what's going on and think before you do things. Stop with the sprays and poisons and let the dandelions be. Remember that you can't always trust the government to make the right judgments. Take action yourself," he advises.

"The best thing about this is I've met a lot of great people since I've been involved," says Frank. "It's been a great experience. I've had help from a lot of people and support from businesses, judges, donations, etc. I do this because it makes my heart feel good. I'm very fortunate to live in this area. We have to save open space for future generations. I saw what happened in NJ and I don't want

that to happen here."

When we finished speaking, Frank's day still wasn't done. He was off to join in an organized monthly walk and had a few other things on his to-do list too. He is a humble man and shakes his head in wonderment at his success in life and all the attention he is receiving. "Why me?" he asks. "Who would have ever thought," he shakes his head again. But I can see why. Some people just "have it." Some people touch others wherever they go, even if it's just in an interview for a story. They leave smiles on the faces of all they meet. Good teachers spark something in their students and push them to their highest potential. Great teachers push them to the stars and end up leaving a piece of themselves to be spread out into the world, influencing people and events for generations to come. I think there is a lot of Frank Berlin out in this world....

There are many ways for the community to be involved and help with preserving the open space in our area. For more information and a list of upcoming events, visit <http://cliftonparkopenspaces.org>. ■

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