

Winagamie Golf Course donated to Appleton Education Foundation

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(Photo: Dan Powers/Post-Crescent Media)

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TOWN OF CLAYTON – Winagamie Golf Course has been a second home to Mary Beth Nienhaus for 43 years. Now, the legendary educator, coach, golfer and benefactor has donated the 27-hole facility to the Appleton Education Foundation.

“It’s humbling that Mary Beth would think of the Appleton Education Foundation as such a worthy recipient,” said Julie Krause, executive director of the foundation. The golf course, with an estimated value of more than \$2.5 million, is the largest gift the foundation has ever received, she said.

An agreement for Nienhaus, 70, of Appleton, to give the golf course to the AEF was finalized at the end of 2013, and was formally announced today during a press conference at the golf course. The Appleton Area School District and Fox Valley Technical College are collaborating with AEF to offer local students hands-on learning

experiences at the facility — from small engine repair to horticulture, agronomy, marketing and event planning.

The course will continue to be open to golfers.

Nienhaus, a longtime golf professional at Winagamie, became a partner in the business in 1972. She took over sole ownership in 1993.

She said she had a prospective buyer for the property, but by donating it to the foundation, she will preserve the legacy she's worked so tirelessly to build. A board of directors will oversee the course's operations, and it will continue as a for-profit business. Any profits will be set aside for capital improvements to the golf course, Krause said. AEF will eventually receive dividends from the course, and will use them to fund grants for educators in Appleton schools, but no AEF funds will be put toward the course.

This isn't Nienhaus' first contribution to AEF. In 1997, she gave the foundation one of its first major gifts — \$200,000 for the renovations at Goodland Field. Nienhaus Sports Complex is now home to the Appleton West baseball, softball and soccer teams.

Her relationship with AEF didn't end there. In 2011, she committed a matching gift of \$100,000 to West for improved physical education and athletic facilities.

Appleton Schools District Administrator Lee Allinger said he isn't surprised by Nienhaus' generosity.

"Mary Beth is a person who has this incredible community vision and has really backed up her beliefs with the actions she's taken over the years," he said.

Extensive possibilities

Nancy Johnshoy, Winagamie, Inc. board president and AEF director, said the foundation thought long and hard about the golf course and how it would benefit local students.

"At first glance, owning a golf course operation may not seem like a natural fit for the Appleton Education Foundation, but as we thought about it and let our imaginations wander, we realized it has a natural tie-in for the school district and Fox Valley Technical College," Johnshoy said.

Teachers from FVTC and the Appleton Area School District will collaborate to create learning opportunities for students at Winagamie.

Susan May, president of FVTC and a member of the Winagamie board of directors, said she's thrilled to see students learning in a "realistic laboratory" at the golf course.

Nienhaus will continue to be involved in golf course operations as a member of the board of directors and through the junior golf academy. When she decides the time is right, Nienhaus will give AEF control of the junior golf academy. The foundation will continue the academy's mission into the future.

With more spare time on the horizon, Nienhaus hopes to travel more during the summer, to continue volunteering and to play golf.

"I have this wonderful golf course here and I hardly play golf," she said. "Years ago I used to play well, and then once I turned professional I gave lessons — tons of lessons, thousands of lessons over the years — and, of course, then I couldn't do everything, so I didn't play a lot of golf."

When Nienhaus looks out over the expansive golf course, which opened in 1962, she is reminded of her parents.

"I see my dad (Sylvester) all the time, because he planted over 600 evergreens out here," she said. "When he planted them they were probably three, four feet high. And now you take a look at them and they're huge."

The hard work ethic that drives Nienhaus came from her parents, she said. Her father spent more than 40 years at Kimberly-Clark Corp. and worked part-time at Gelbke's Nursery. Her mother, Mabel, worked a variety of jobs over the years and was employed in the pro shop at Winagamie for a time.

Enviably career

Nienhaus distinguished herself in teaching, golfing and coaching over the years.

She won the Wisconsin Women's Public Links Golf Association Amateur Championship in 1963 and 1964. The victories helped her become Marquette University's first female varsity student-athlete: She joined the men's golf team in 1965.

Nienhaus was the first person to represent Marquette in intercollegiate postseason play. She won the Wisconsin State Golf Association Championship in 1968 and 1969, and was named the Wisconsin Female Golfer of the Year in 1969.

Teaching has always been a passion for Nienhaus. She taught physical education at Appleton West High School for 28 years and coached the girls' golf team for 25 years. During her tenure as a golf coach, West won four state championships. She was named the LPGA Coach of the Year in 1987 — the only high school coach ever to receive the award.

Her passions for teaching and golf led her to start the Winagamie Junior Golf Academy, which teaches the game to children. It's funded through the Winagamie Golf Foundation and is one of the state's largest junior golf programs.

Even though she retired from the school district in 1999, Nienhaus still logs 80- to 90-hour work weeks during the golf season. In winter she travels abroad for mission trips and volunteers at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton, Loaves and Fishes and her church. Donating the course will allow her to take a step back, albeit a small one, she said.

An independent person and trailblazer, Nienhaus is single and has no children. She said people at the golf course often ask where her husband is.

"They think I'm sort of a token owner or something. When I tell them I'm the sole owner I think that takes them back a little bit," Nienhaus said.

"The cute thing I always say is because I'm so independent if I would have married and had children, then the husband clearly would have been the one to take care of the kids and make the meals and everything," she said. "Of course, years ago that never would have happened. Nowadays it's a more common occurrence."

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Mary Beth Nienhaus' career

- Wisconsin Women's Public Links Golf Association Amateur Championship, 1963 and 1964
- Wisconsin Female Golfer of the Year, 1969
- Wisconsin State Golf Association Championship, 1968 and 1969
- Becomes a partner in Winagamie Golf Course, 1972
- LPGA Coach of the Year, 1987
- LPGA Midwest Professional of the Year, 1992
- Becomes sole owner of Winagamie Golf Course, 1993
- Donates \$200,000 to Appleton Education Foundation for Goodland Field renovations, 1997
- Women's Sports Advocates of Wisconsin Lifetime Achievement Award, 2001

- Established nonprofit Winagamie Golf Foundation, which oversees the Winagamie Junior Golf Academy, 2002
- Donates \$100,000 to Appleton West for athletic facilities and physical education programming, 2011
- Marquette University Distinguished Alumna of the Year, 2011
- Gives Winagamie Golf Course to the Appleton Education Foundation, 2014

Source: Appleton Education Foundation, Mary Beth Nienhaus

Winagamie Golf Course

- Founded in 1962
- 27 holes on 200 acres, driving range
- 35 acres of farmland and wetlands
- Estimated value: \$2.5 million
- Season pass holders: 50
- Full-time employees: 2
- Seasonal employees: 15
- Houses the Winagamie Junior Golf Academy
- General manager and head golf pro: Dan McGinn

Source: Appleton Education Foundation

Appleton Education Foundation

- Launched in 1997
- Distributed \$3.2 million in grants to the Appleton schools
- Started the “Brain to 5” education program series, 2008
- Fiscal agent for Appleton schools capital campaigns
- Stewards about 70 charitable funds, including the Mile of Music Education Fund

- Presents the Thomas G. Scullen Leadership Award each year to a leading Fox Valley educator

Source: Appleton Education Foundation