

# Parma couple spreads the word on raptors



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Paul Schnell heard the call of the wild at a young age. ¶ Growing up near Buffalo, his days were filled with hunting and hiking, fishing and trapping. It seemed only natural to photograph what he saw and write down what he felt. ¶ And then, after acing a high school science project by showing slides he took of birds, bugs and animals to his classmates to explain the food chain, he heard the call of another kind: educator. ¶ "Even as a kid I felt I was destined to do something — not great — but something important in conservation education," Schnell said.

Paul Schnell has fulfilled his destiny, and one could argue that it isn't just important what he does, but pretty great, too.

His Institute for Environmental Learning ([ielraptors.org](http://ielraptors.org)) headquartered on Lighthouse Road, Parma, in a warm, lodge-style home on 10 acres of land he shares with his wife and business partner, Anne, is celebrating 30 years of elevating awareness, appreciation and preservation of our natural world.

Paul, 53, and Anne, 45, do programming on a variety of topics as myriad as birds in the sky. From raptors to gray wolves to landscaping for wildlife, from nature photography to Aldo Leopold's land ethic teachings, the Schnells reach a flock of 6,000 to 10,000 people a year.

Their famous family of live non-releasable hawks, owls and eagles helps them connect with and inspire audiences. Liberty, a female bald eagle with a broken wing, is one of the most photographed eagles in the world and was a guest on the *Today Show*. She and Paul have been together nearly 25 years.

While many wildlife education programs survive on donations, public funding and armies of volunteers, IEL, first developed as a lecture series in 1982, charges negotiable fees. The care of birds of prey is



an expensive, 24/7 commitment that comes with stringent government oversight, and the Schnells' business is in addition to full-time jobs. Paul operates heavy equipment and Anne is a professor and chairwoman of Finger Lakes Community College's environmental conservation department, making for 70- to 80-hour workweeks.

But time flies when you're having fun.

"I'm proud we've done this without taxpayer dollars," said Paul, who graduated from SUNY Morrisville with a degree in natural resources.

"We're paid to do our programs and that's that. Small businesses that last 10 years are doing well and here we are at 30 years."

To mark IEL's milestone, Paul, who has a gene for Harleys and classic cars, purchased a fully restored 1963 Chevy panel truck painted in sunburst orange from Wisconsin. He adorned it with artwork decals of his birds and lettering announcing "Conservation Programs Since 1982."

Used to transport their birds to festivals, schools, civic and corporate events, the cool rig and its rolling advertising has been dubbed "The Bird Buggy."

"We get a lot of thumbs up driving around," Paul said. So does their mission of helping make the natural world a better place.

The Schnells met in 2005 at the annual Bird of Prey Days at Braddock Bay Park, which Anne helps organize. You know

Paul and Anne Schnell of Parma are a husband-wife wildlife education team. They founded the Institute for Environmental Learning and care for raptors at their home. KATE MELTON

what they say about birds of a feather. The couple were married two years later in their backyard, the maid of honor holding a red-tail hawk and the best man a bald eagle during the vows.

"Once Paul and I got married and moved here, it changed my world a bit," said Anne, a native of Washington state who holds wildlife degrees from Washington State University and New Hampshire.

"A bit" would be living smack under a major North American migration flyway and building a 3,000-square-foot building to house their birds of prey. Their yard, landscaped to attract wildlife with a pond and nesting boxes, is a haven for raptor activity. The Schnells also own 160 nearby acres they maintain as forever wild.

"A lot of what we do with the birds and the programs is after we've been at work all day, so it can be tiring and a little overwhelming at times," Anne said. "But when we are able to take the birds out, deliver the messages we do, and see the looks on the faces of little kids ... to share that is pretty special. It never gets old."

Anne's daily message to her FLCC students is simple but profound: find your passion. She and Paul embody that.

The affable Paul is the showman of the husband-wife team.

When giving his "Bison and Buffalo Hunters" program, he wears the period garb of a 19th

century Great Plains hunter, taking on the persona of the real-life Frank Mayer. An accomplished big game hunter himself whose adventures have taken him from Alaska to Africa, Paul brings in the skull, hide and 1875 Sharps rifle he used to drop a 1,800-pound bull bison in Nebraska.

With his audience's attention, he can speak not just about the role hunting plays in conservation but about a tragic period in U.S. history involving the mistreatment of natural resources and Native Americans.

"The Boy Scouts eat it up," he said.

A raptor handler since he was 13, Schnell maintained a rare captive pack of gray wolves in Lyndonville, Orleans County, during the 1990s that drew a ton of publicity. Since captive wildlife makes for a captive audience, Paul doesn't shy from using the opportunity to talk about hot-button environmental issues.

"I find audiences today want and need more than just the basic feature outlines of what a bird of prey is and that they eat mice," he said. "I use the birds as a jumping off point to talk about land ethics, sustainability and human population control. I sneak this stuff in."

Paul and Anne, who have master level bird banding licenses, have taught scores of volunteers while working with wildlife rehabilitators, conservation clubs and DEC biologists.

In 2012, Paul published a pictorial book *Eagle Doctors*, the story of Liberty, Solo and Bron-yr-aur and the Buffalo veterinarians, Jay Geasling and Rene van Ee, who have provided care for two-plus decades.

Liberty, 24½, is being treated for osteoarthritis of the ankle and at some point won't be able to travel. But the Schnells are committed to their environmental education programs as long as Liberty is up to it. Bald eagles can live to 50 in captivity.

"I've been very fortunate," Paul Schnell said. "Along the way, I feel I've been able to connect to my audiences and imbue this notion that the world is bigger than just us individually and we need to start thinking about the planet and the survival of future generations."

The call of conservation education echoes in the eagle's screech.

Paul and Anne Schnell hear it every day.