

August 11, 2008 3:10AM

## Butterfly fest set for Saturday

### Event to honor devotee of nature

By Pamela H. Sacks TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
[psacks@telegram.com](mailto:psacks@telegram.com)

Dr. Bill Benner holds a snapshot of Barbara Walker in his mind's eye. She is reacting with a burst of joy to a rare treat served up by nature.

Mrs. Walker and her husband, Rick, were on a trip to the northern Sierras with other members of the Massachusetts Butterfly Club. She had come across the nest of a golden eagle.

"She was running across the field," Dr. Benner said. "She looked so happy. It's a wonderful memory of her."

Mrs. Walker died of breast cancer in March at the age of 58. She had battled the disease for nearly two years, but she had carried on so well that her death came as a surprise to many people. Only her family and a few close friends were aware of the extent of her illness.

Mrs. Walker was in her glory when she was out in the natural world. She and her family would often make the short trip from their home in Auburn to volunteer at Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Worcester, and she was closely involved in the sanctuary's overall management plan.

At the same time, she didn't hesitate to do the heavy lifting. The Walkers and their children, Michael and Kerry, got into the muck and mud at the urban oasis and did whatever needed to be done.

The water in the brook that defines the sanctuary comes in through storm drains. Until a filter was put in place, the flow used to bring with it all sorts of trash. Martha Gach, the conservation coordinator, recalled the time she promised herself that she would gather a team and clean up the brook.

"I came back after a weekend prepared to do this, and I looked at it and it was clean," Ms. Gach said. "Barbara, Rick and their kids got in there and cleaned it up. I don't know how many bags of trash they took out. She just did it."

Mrs. Walker had broad interests in science and nature but a special devotion to butterflies. Broad Meadow Brook has 78 species, a greater diversity of the delicate, fluttery insects than exists at any of the other Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuaries. Mrs. Walker identified many of them.

"For me, she was my butterfly mentor," Ms. Gach said. "She would say, 'I know there are more. This summer we're going to find more.'"

Mrs. Walker's favorite butterfly was the hairstreak. Elise Barry, her close friend and fellow butterfly enthusiast, said the hairstreak flies fast and is more elusive than other species. Mrs. Walker had a knack for finding them.

"Barbara loved being outdoors and enjoyed everything in it — birds, butterflies, flowers, the ocean, the breeze," Ms. Barry said. "We'd always say, 'There's no such thing as a bad day in the field.' And there wasn't. Her smile could positively glow and make you feel good all over. It was such a thrill to be thrilled with her. She was a wonderful person."



Barbara Walker, holding glasses, admires a Green Comma butterfly that had lighted on Ron Cloutier's finger. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Last winter, when Kristin Steinmetz, a natural history guide at the sanctuary, proposed hosting a butterfly festival, she counted on Mrs. Walker's help in planning it. When Mrs. Walker died, there was no question that the festival would be named in her honor.

Ms. Barry and other members of the Massachusetts Butterfly Club stepped in to assist Ms. Steinmetz. They have put together a full day of activities.

The Barbara Walker Butterfly Festival will take place on Saturday, or, if it should rain, on Sunday at Broad Meadow Brook. There will be music, games, butterfly walks, butterfly crafts and tours of the butterfly garden, among other happenings. Members of the butterfly club will lead the walks, and Ms. Steinmetz said that it is an opportunity to "sit at the feet of masters."

One of Mrs. Walker's pet projects was to develop a management plan for the sanctuary's butterfly meadow. During the festival, the meadow will be dedicated in her memory.

Mrs. Walker's love of science had spurred her to return to school and earn a degree in microbiology from Framingham State College. In 1997, she went to work in Dr. Stephen Lambert's laboratory at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Lambert had just completed his training, and she set up his lab for him. Dr. Lambert explained that she would "translate my desires into practical experiments." She was responsible, as well, for the overall operation of the lab.

"She had an incredible work ethic," Dr. Lambert said. "She would come in during weekends. She knew what had to be done and she did it. There was none of this, 'I've got to go now.'" Their relationship was unusual, he said, because he considered her a friend.

Dr. Lambert left in 2005 to take a position in Florida, and Mrs. Walker worked for a year in Dr. Joel Richter's lab at the medical school. She retired in 2007.

If lab work consumed her professional life, the passion for nature she shared with family and friends dominated her personal life. She served as a vice president of the butterfly club, organized butterfly institutes and field trips and participated in annual butterfly counts. She would show up early at the club's annual meetings, bring food and clean up afterward. "She did a lot of the work," said Dr. Benner, who is a veterinarian and serves as the club's president.

The Walkers traveled with other members of the club to California, Texas and Mexico — and even to Trinidad — to observe butterflies. Yet if Mrs. Walker had a little down time at work when an experiment was up and running, she would slip over to Broad Meadow Brook, where, her husband said, she could always find something new and interesting to observe.

Those who knew her say it means a great deal to them that the festival and meadow are dedicated to her.

"It's a tremendous loss," Carl Kamp, a longtime friend who shared her love of butterflies said of Mrs. Walker's death. "The tears keep coming. Everybody misses her."