

Ken Nichols Summer 2006

His preference is the underworld of caving, but Ken Nichols does what cavers call “vertical” work too.

Spelunking has taken him to caves on three continents and was one reason why he settled in Schoharie County three years ago. The other reason was his engagement to Susan Carver, the Arboretum’s Education Director.

His gardening experience began in Brooklyn, where he was surprised by his own success in growing vegetables and flower on a small urban plot. It was what motivated him to study organic gardening with Elliot Coleman in Maine. He counts meeting Helen and Scott Nearing as one of the most memorable experience of his life.

Ken’s professional training was in architecture and information technology, For the last several years, he has served as a consultant in the computer field.

Although Ken has helped Susan with some of her educational programs and Fred Breglia with pruning – introducing the same rope system for climbing trees that he uses in caving – his volunteer time is in large part spent maintaining the Arboretum’s computers. He says that he derives a sense of satisfaction knowing that solving computer problems will help the staff perform their work.

He sees a connection between Nature and the computer, claiming that “living things are the best machines.” The human species, he says, is attracted to problem solving, as the development of the computer demonstrates. But we humans also have “an obligation to understand” the natural world and to “cherish that world and appreciate its beauty.” Ken’s work with computers has taught him that “it’s all about learning to see” – and his experience at the Arboretum has taught him the same lesson, the primacy of seeing.

Ken finds himself drawn to the Greak Oak, noting that it was an oak revered by the ancient Druids. They saw something spiritual about the tree. Perhaps, he speculated, we can learn to see it too.