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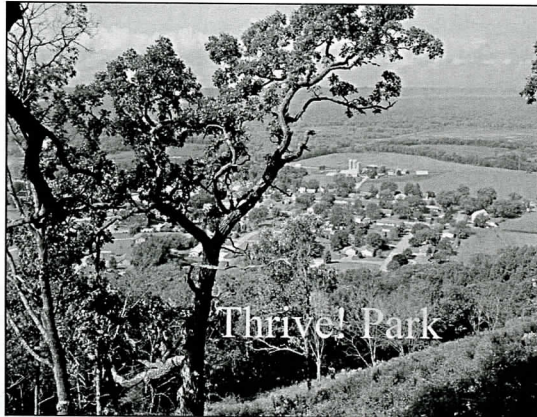
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"I wanted a place for people to get out in the woods, hike the bluffs and prairies, have a picnic and enjoy the beautiful views."

— Gary "Chris" Christopherson



In 2015 the Village of Nelson became the proud owner of a 25+ acre public park **Thrive! Park** by a very generous donation from Gary "Chris" Christopherson.

Chris grew up on a farm in Trout Creek in rural Nelson and graduated from Alma High School. His background is 20 plus years as a Senior Executive in federal government running health agencies and creating health policies in DC.

Chris is also a very talented sculptor, working mainly with copper and black walnut. His love of art started in college and for decades has been a sculptor of abstract art. His home in Nelson also serves as his gallery (over 100 sculptures) and studio where people can visit and experience his very interesting and creative artwork. [www.GChris.org](http://www.GChris.org)

Now let's talk about this exciting new attraction to our area Thrive! Park, a public park for you and your family to explore and enjoy. (For park information and maps, go to [www.ThrivePark.org](http://www.ThrivePark.org))

Chris purchased the 1880's era property in 2003 and knew it was a special property with the original barn, farmhouse and bee house. He needed to decide what to save and restore – which ended up being everything. The best asset was the Mississippi River bluff side land with bluff tops and bluff prairies, and he wanted to somehow share this with others. "I wanted a place where people can get out in the woods, hike the bluffs and prairies, have a picnic and enjoy the beautiful views. There are not a lot of places for people to walk, enjoy the view and get exercise." So after his move back to Nelson in 2012, he began to explore ways to turn his land into a public park for all to experience.

I asked about the significance of the name and what "Thrive" represented? He explained, "Thrive is an endeavor that I began creating about a decade ago while still in Washington, DC. Thrive! seeks a thriving and surviving future for all forever. Thrive is aspiration, vision, mission and a call to action. To improve the community, people, and earth, we don't just survive we Thrive! And so Thrive! Park was named."

In 2014 the US Fish and Wildlife, Buffalo County and Chris funded the effort to restore the two large bluff prairies in the park: Pike's Peak and the 2 Sister's. The Hetrick family helped fund Pike's Peak top and lower prairie. "Our intent was to restore them a bit closer to what they would have been like back in the 1800s."

Prior to meeting with Chris, I didn't understand Prairie Restoration, but now have great respect for what they did. "Restoration" means to take off everything that shouldn't be there such as cedar trees, buckthorn, and prickly ash. They had to not only cut the trees

but also treat them so they wouldn't grow back. Clearing the prairies was mostly done by Erik and Beth of Ku-le Region Forestry. He showed me a map of "before" and "after" the restoration and I was amazed and have a lot of respect for what they accomplished. No doubt it was very time intensive work and a labor of love. Very hard labor! By doing the clearing, the "prairie" is now open to the sun and air, and the wildflowers along with other native plants unique to bluff prairies have already flourished.

When Chris decided to share this beauty with the public and donate his land of 25+ acres he said, "I first approached Buffalo County who declined my offer; but the Village of Nelson, under the leadership of Village President Elroy Brommer, accepted the gift."

I wondered how you design and create hiking roads and trails up a bluff. He explained, "Fortunately, there were already two logging/farm roads to build on. But they needed to be improved and extended. Then, the challenge was to build a set of trails that connect off the hiking roads, move through the woods, move up through the restored bluff prairies and reach up to the bluff tops. Most of the public hiking is on the hiking roads and on the trails leading to the Sisters (two of the three Sisters are in the Park) and the Lost Brother. In building the 3 foot wide trails, it was key to find ways to not only build the trails but to find trails that would be easier to maintain, less likely to get overgrown with berry vines, prickly ash, and buckthorn. The deer and I formed a partnership where I would use their trails, and they would use mine. While the hiking trails to the bluff tops are a bit steep, they are readily hikable, as many people have. The reward is a magnificent 15+ mile panorama view of the Mississippi River valley reaching as far West as the Minnesota bluffs and as far north as Lake Pepin."

The park opened in October 2016 and Bruce Brommer from the Village of Nelson added a parking area at the entrance of the Park and upgraded the initial hiking roads to prevent erosion. Chris feels it's become a very positive partnership between him and the Village of Nelson. He hopes that the Park will become an educational opportunity where students and adults can learn about the Mississippi River bluffs and prairies, about prairie restoration, and about the plants and wildlife that thrive in this environment.

As of now, Chris is the Park's first volunteer and has been doing most of the trail maintenance with the Village's Bruce Brommer doing the mowing. He would love to see the community get involved in the maintenance effort. "Whether its school or community groups or both; it would be a good education and great exercise."

When asked about plans for the future, he'd like to add a few more trails and is working on adding some picnic tables through a venture with Alma High School. Chris is donating the materials, and the Alma shop class will build them.

In closing, Chris said that he recently proposed to the Buffalo County Board to partner with the Village of Nelson on Thrive! Park. He is proposing for them to acquire (at no acquisition cost) his remaining four acres and the buildings when he is no longer living there to use as a visitor and educational center. So we'll have to wait and see where that goes.

*Editor's Note: Unfortunately I wasn't able to hike the trails, but I was able to walk around enough to enjoy the views. It was breathtaking and can only imagine how beautiful it must be as you walk the trails up the bluff. I hope you put Thrive! Park on your bucket list and experience this beautiful gift that we are fortunate to have right in our back bluff, so-to-speak. If you'd like to donate money for tables or benches or to help with the maintenance of Thrive! Park, please contact the Village of Nelson. [www.ThrivePark.org](http://www.ThrivePark.org)*

