

Filmmaker not content to watch Orange Lake wetlands die

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Terry Neal stands in front of Orange Lake in Temple Terrace. Apathy about the wetlands and the effort to create a retention pond led the president of the Temple Crest Civic Association to act.



[KATHLEEN FLYNN | Times]

TEMPLE TERRACE — Some make movies for the glitz and glamor of Hollywood. Terry Neal made his movie to save Orange Lake.

Neal lives in a neighborhood near the 7-acre U-shaped marsh that borders Temple Crest Park.

Under the name Terry's Moving Pictures, he created the documentary *Orange Lake, Nature's Bounty*, hoping to attract attention to deteriorating environmental conditions there.

"I approached this thing knowing it would not be as big as a Harry Potter," Neal said slightly tongue-in-cheek.

He created 100 copies with a county neighborhood grant of \$750. One is at the Temple Terrace Library. Others were sent to *National Geographic* and media outlets across the country. Another copy was entered in the 2010 Sundance Film Festival.

Neal wrote, produced, directed and narrated the film, his first. He bought a digital camcorder and did the editing at home.

About the time he wrapped up production, in May, he suffered a stroke. Still, he screened the film at an old church used by Temple Terrace Preservation Society about a week later.

"It is more important now than ever to save the wetlands," Neal said.

Move toward nature

Neal, 54, found his house on River Hills Drive in 1990. Moving there fueled his passion for the environment.

Parts of northern Hillsborough were built out, so he was amazed to still be able to slip into a bucolic lifestyle from his back yard, the Hillsborough River.

"I was surprised. It was in the middle of an urban area like Tampa, but when you walk out back it's like you're in the middle of the country," Neal said.

The hidden serenity of Orange Lake is about half a mile from his house and half a block from 40th Street, he said. Neal, president of the Temple Crest Civic Association, began filming and taking pictures of the 40th Street construction project to save for the association's archives.

While doing so, Neal realized that low water levels and stormwater runoff were hurting the nearby lake.

He noticed fewer animals in his back yard and thought conditions at Orange Lake were partly to blame. The "aha" moment for Neal to make the movie was when he noticed work on a man-made retention pond as part of the road project. If money was being spent to create the pond, why not try to save the natural ecosystem, too?

Stormwater runoff brings high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous that help algae blooms and hyacinth. Low water levels make it harder for fish, birds and other animals that depend on the ecosystem.

A hidden jewel

He made the movie because he wants to see the lake preserved as a piece of Florida history.

"Thousands of people drive by it every day, and no one knows it's there," said Neal, who has written computer help books and used to work as a sales manager for a publishing company. "We're spending all this money on this state-of-the-art retention pond, and look at what's going on right behind here. It's dying."

Members of the Tampa chapter of the Audubon of Florida have counted bird nests near Orange Lake each year starting in 1994. Bird nest counters said the colony was inactive in 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 because of the lake's low water level.

Neal created the 27-minute documentary by filming at the lake and combining old photos with narration, Ken Burns style. A nine-minute clip is available on YouTube.

Neal paid \$35 to submit his film to the 2010 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, Jan. 21-31. He does not see the film as a runaway hit at the festival, but he said taking care of the environment is a universal message.

"Saving it is as important as restoring what we have destroyed," he said in the film.

"I am sure in your city or area there is an Orange Lake, a place that is deteriorating, a place that needs to be rescued."

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FAST FACTS

Watch a clip

Check out a clip of the documentary at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kpFMHBjRlU>

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