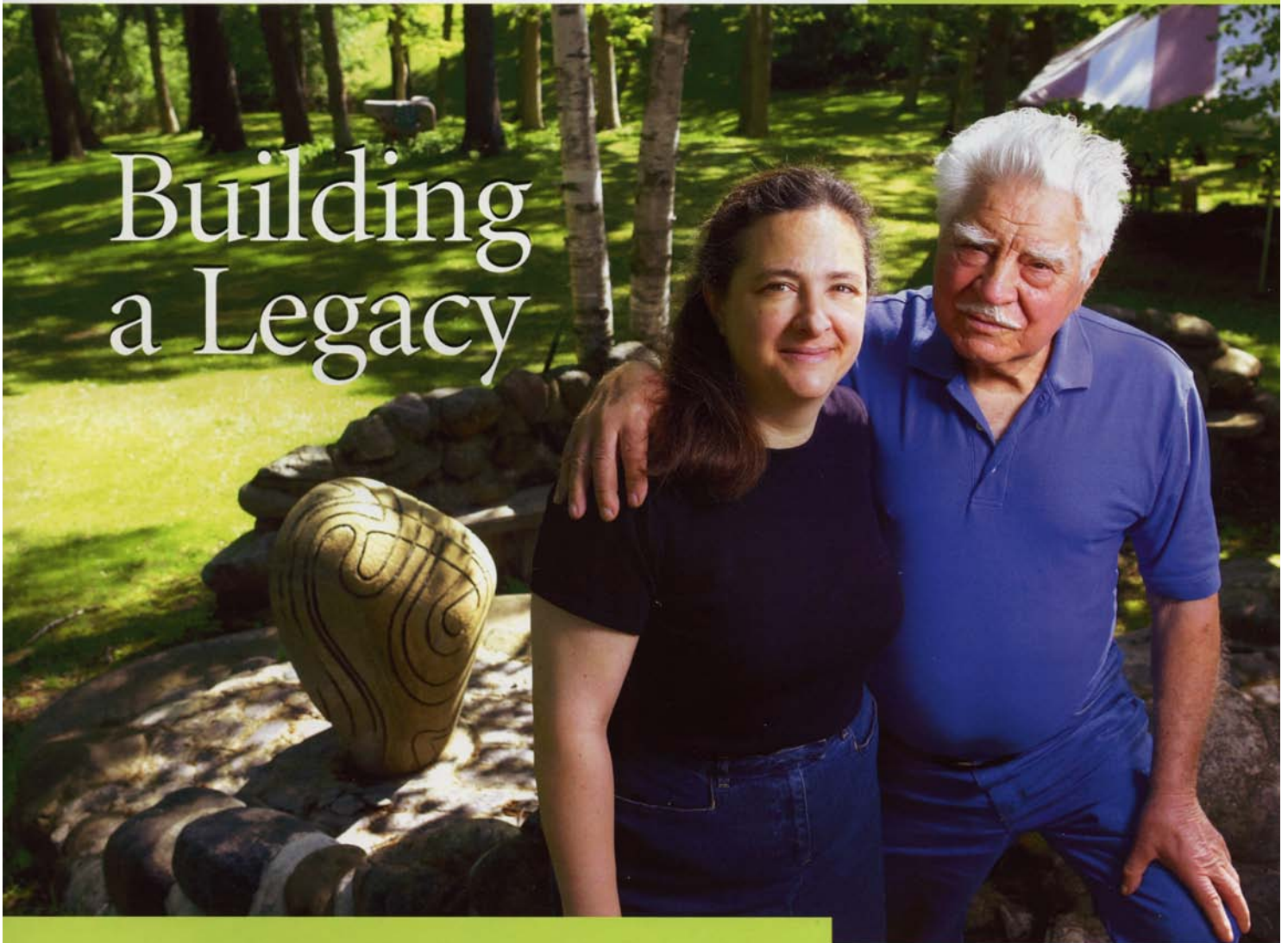


# Building a Legacy



**Creating a lasting educational and cultural experience is a dream-in-progress for this Eagan couple.**

Cheryl and Tony Caponi spend their days working on the art park, which is open to the public.

By Alyssa Geronsin Photo Todd Buchanan

Imagine growing up in the most beautiful place you've ever known, then leaving. Imagine returning to that place, not as a citizen or a visitor, but as a soldier, fighting in the village you once called home. How would it affect you? If you are Anthony Caponi, you return to the new country and spend your life recreating the beauty of your homeland—not for yourself, but for the education and empowerment of those around you. You become an artist, a poet, a philosopher and, at times, a politician.

Long-time Eagan resident Anthony Caponi was born in the picturesque vil-

lage of Pretare, on the Adriatic coast in north central Italy. He immigrated to the United States as a teen, but returned to Europe as a young man during World War II. After the war, Caponi became an art professor at Macalester College in St. Paul, where he taught, and eventually headed the department, until his retirement in 1991.

The young, progressive teacher caused quite a stir at then-conservative Macalester by playing classical music during class and allowing a pet cat to roam free in the studio. Caponi feels that his age—he began teaching at 28—worked to his advantage. “I was a good teacher

because I was learning with my students,” he says.

Around the time he started teaching, Caponi moved from rural Edina to a 40-acre parcel of land in the township of Eagan—he later bought another large parcel of land adjacent to his original property. With a wife and two young children in tow, Caponi began building a house. He also began collecting fieldstones from the neighboring farmers, using them to create intricate retaining walls on his hilly property. “I wanted to recreate my childhood,” he says, referring to the mountainous village where he grew up.

The serene setting lent well to Caponi's



This snake winding along a walking path is just one of the many sculptures located throughout the property.

creative aspirations, and he soon began installing his sculptures, created from natural materials and “whatever is on hand,” around the property, which eventually became known as Caponi Art Park ([www.caponiartpark.org](http://www.caponiartpark.org)). He even recalls bringing his students to his house and teaching lessons from the branches of a large tree.

Over the years, Caponi watched the city of Eagan grow rapidly around his little slice of paradise. Before long, there were developers knocking at his door, wanting to buy his land, but Caponi refused. He knew the art park could be invaluable to countless people for many generations, and so he has spent decades fighting both developers and the government to maintain the land as a cultural and educational resource to the public.

**“We want to do something that will keep on growing.”**

**– TONY CAPONI**

Caponi met his current wife, Cheryl, about five years after his first wife, the mother of his four oldest children, passed away. At the time, Cheryl was a senior art major at the University of Minnesota, studying photography and printmaking, and Tony was a grieving widower, approaching retirement.

The couple, together for 28 years, feels they were drawn to each other because of their shared values, love of art and appreciation of the environment, but they also admit they are very different from each other. Those differences, they say, work to their advantage, which is a good thing because as Cheryl puts it, “no two people spend as much time together,” especially now that the couple’s daughters, Renata and Rosanna, are in college.

The Caponi’s have spent a good part of their lives not only creating the artwork and maintaining the grounds but also working to ensure Caponi Art Park, which is not financially supported by the city, is around for future generations. In addition to applying for grants, which fund the park’s operations, the Caponi’s recently negotiated a contract with the city that guarantees protection of the park, which is a pivotal part of the Eagan Core Greenway.

“The important thing is that we are here to serve the community,” Tony says. “We want to do something that will keep on growing.” **12**