

Group eyes fundraiser to replace cracked ‘flowform’

HOUSATONIC RIVER

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BY HEATHER BELLOW

GREAT BARRINGTON — It helps water find a rhythm between a Main Street storm drain and the riverbank. It is both a small and a large gesture. A statement. A wish for a troubled river.

After last week’s rains, the Housatonic River was high and churning, and the drain steadily releasing into three hand-sculpted cradles. They took on the water, and like a circulatory staircase, sent it pulsing and meandering down to the river.

Flowforms, as they are called, purify and aerate water by mimicking its natural and most harmonious flow, said Rachel Fletcher, founder and director of the Housatonic River Walk, a National Recreation Trail, which installed these in 1994.

“Every design decision we make also takes the health of the river to heart,” Fletcher said.

A River Walk guide also says flow-forms have been installed worldwide “in banks, schools, health centers and parks, and have been used successfully to help process raw sewage organically.”

One of the Housatonic forms is cracked, and the River Walk’s partner, the Great Barrington Land Conservancy, is considering a fundraising effort to replace it, said board member Christine Ward.

Fletcher said microscopic analysis of water movement on its trip through a flowform reveals geometric patterns like a rosette church window, rather than chaotic patterns seen in polluted water.

It started with a hydrologist. Nearly 70 years ago Theodor Schwenk, who founded the Institute for Flow Sciences in Germany, wondered how life forces could be restored to water where the pressure of modern development on the ecosystem had driven out its vitality and health. Schwenk explores water movement in his 1962 book, “Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air.”

Then came mathematician George Adams, who with Schwenk discovered the similarities and relationship between water’s natural movements and that of other biological and cosmic activity.

It was one of Adams’ students, John Wilkes, author of “Flowforms,” who molded the spine-like forms into organ-like vessels to re-enliven water. These weren’t just scientific exercises. The men were having an encounter with the mysteries of water’s behavior, and exploring their ideas about its spiritual mechanics, something hinted at by Jacques Cousteau in the preface to Schwenk’s book, as he describes a deep sea dive.

“All that life around us was really water, modeled according to its own laws, vitalized by each fresh

venture, striving to rise into consciousness.”

Schwenk, Adams and Wilkes were students of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy. And Fletcher said part of the impulse to install the flowforms was to honor students from the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School, who worked on the River Walk year after year.

Fletcher recalls driving the concrete flowforms here in a pickup from the Water Research Institute of Blue Hill in Maine, where Jennifer Greene, the founder and director, pioneered flowform work in the US starting in 1980.

They are heavy and expensive — about \$1,000 per form, she said. And you can’t get them in New England anymore.

“California is too far a drive,” she added.

Fletcher said this stretch of river has been nurtured and loved, and the flowforms are testament to that.

“It’s only a half a mile long,” she said of the River Walk. “But every inch of it is has been handcrafted, delicately thought out.”

In his book, Schwenk says water is a great bearer of information and intent.

“Water passes on the ‘impressions’ it has received wherever it is absorbed by the earth and the plants, by the animals and man.”

Fletcher knows this well — it is what brought the flowforms to the river.

“It’s a small gesture of what we can do and what we might do.”

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Concrete sculpted flowforms transform water from a Main Street storm drain that releases into the Housatonic River Walk in Great Barrington

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