

The Berkshire Eagle

River Walk welcomes next generation

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The Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk celebrates 25 years on Saturday.

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GREAT BARRINGTON -- A labor of love and the passion it brings are meant to be shared. The Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk will share its success and honor the people who have built it in a grand way this Saturday - for its 25th anniversary.

The River Walk began as a small piece of a clean-up project. It has grown into a larger undertaking than any of its beginning volunteers ever could have imagined.

Founding director Rachel Fletcher explained that the effort started as a restoration of the remains of a fire that took place in 1972 at the old Melvin's Drug Store in Great Barrington.

She felt that the volunteer work should earn a return, so she negotiated permission to get a public access in exchange for the clean-up. This, in retrospect, was a very smart move. It gave the volunteers a goal to work toward, and the walk along the Housatonic River has grown organically at the center of town.

"We never had a master plan; we just did it piece by piece," Fletcher said. "We were able to negotiate as successfully as we did because we could see tangibly what it was. (The river walk) grew up as the community grew to feel comfortable with the idea of it."

According to Fletcher, the group of volunteers started with 11 and has grown to as many as 2,400, mostly from south county, and more than half students from Berkshire Community College, the Rudolf Steiner School and Bard College at Simon's Rock. Some of these students, a group called the Greenagers, have had a great hand in helping the river walk along its path.

On Saturday, River Walk will reward the work of the Greenagers with a formal partnership between the two groups.

The Greenagers, led by program director Will Conklin, started four years ago as a project of the Center for Peace through Culture, based in Monterey. The idea, Conklin said, "was to get young people involved with the care of the planet. It started as an outreach and activist group with the idea of community service learning, volunteering and engaging local youth in local projects that are beneficial to the environment and community to promote preservation and recreation of the outdoors."

For the last three summers, Conklin explained, youth employment programs have provided 22 local students with jobs throughout the year, and nearly 175 more people are involved in the program.

In general, the group does a lot of trail work, Conklin said: "Through volunteers and paid programming, the kids work on new trail construction and trail maintenance and betterment, so local trails remain safe and accessible."

As far as the Great Barrington Housatonic River Walk goes, apprentices have been recruited and hired to be responsible for weekly tasks including improvements such as horticultural installations, pruning and general upkeep.

Kevin Pieropan, 18, has worked on the river walk for two years. A neighbor of Fletcher's. he started out working on her farm, and through her he learned about the River Walk.

"It changed my life," Pieropan said.

When he began work on the river, he was facing a difficult time.

"It gave me something concrete to stand on," he said. "I'm not standing on thin ice anymore."

A paid worker, he spends three to four days a week working on the River Walk, which has given him a path to follow.

"I've started studying botany and started liking plants more," he said.

This interest he attributes to his work with Heather Cupo, a horticulturist who has worked on the river walk for 14 years.

"When I worked with Heather, the way she taught me was fun," he said.

Cupo, who has owned Plant Euphoria in Windsor for most of her time with River Walk and has a degree in landscape architecture, works mostly with plants and erosion control on the River Walk, while making it an attractive public space. "There is a dual purpose in pretty much everything we do," she said. "We serve the needs of the community as well as the needs of the land."

Pieropan, a 2012 honors graduate of Monument Mountain Regional High School, plans to attend BCC in the fall with a focus on botany and zoology. For his future, he sees himself possibly becoming a park ranger.

He will put the enthusiasm and passion he feels toward his project into words as part of the River Walk's 25th anniversary celebration this Saturday. River Walk and the Greenagers have asked him to give a speech that will bring the groups together.

River Walk and Greenagers together are proof that anything can be overcome.

Heather Cupo sums it all up perfectly.

"We're continuing between the past and future with Greenagers," she said. "Without programs like this, young people have no reason to stay in this area and often can't figure out how to overcome the hurdles in their lives."