



Ann Breen

Committed to Waterfronts for Community Enrichment

Although people in the Mississippi Valley region may not have heard of Ann Breen, she has played a significant role in some of the most prominent waterfront projects in our area. Ann and her organization, the Waterfront Center, have worked with many local civic organizations such as River Action, Inc., the City of Bettendorf, the Quad-City Convention and Visitors Bureau as well as doing work in the Clinton area. Ann states that the Waterfront Center philosophy is “to encourage each city and town to aim for the highest aspirations for itself and its waterfront. We go beyond design and economics to reach deep into a community’s history.” This holistic approach makes Ann, and the Waterfront Center, unique in the world of waterfront renewal.

By Julie Seier

Ann first became interested in waterfronts while living in London during the late 1960s. It happened that her interest in the Thames River coincided with her pursuit of a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning. In London Ann became captivated by the role of waterways as trade, social, and historic centers. Visions of the Thames as a center for urban activity took on deeper meaning when a friend took Ann on a tour of the Thames dockland areas. It was there that Ann witnessed first hand how time and neglect can change a waterfront from a vision of beauty to one of ruin and disrepair.

Ann also places summer visits to the area of Newport, New Jersey into the mix of personal experiences that lead to the path of creating the Waterfront Center. Newport itself was undergoing urban renewal, and Ann witnessed how revitalization of an urban coastal area could transform a city or region. Glimpses of other areas of New Jersey such as Hoboken also crystallized for

Ann the need to revitalize flagging waterfront areas and transform them into spaces for social and economic revival.

Although securing her degree would take ten years, mostly due to the pressures and needs of raising a family, Ann would ultimately graduate from George Washington University in Washington, DC. Ann’s studies on urban waterways lead to a position as a waterfront coordinator with the United States Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office of Coastal Zone Management. As a waterfront coordinator, Ann spent her time providing technical assistance to communities and organizations seeking information on waterfront renewal. It was here that Ann first became acquainted with Dick Rigby who would become a co-founder of the Waterfront Center. Although Ann was initially satisfied with the work, the focus of the program began to shift when a new administration was ushered

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into Washington. It was at this point that Ann and Dick pooled some of their personal savings to fund the Waterfront Center.

Ann defines the center taking a “holistic approach” as meaning that they approach projects by looking at outcomes and changes that encompass both conservation and economic development. This enables the Waterfront Center to bring together people with opposing views to find a middle ground. One of the ways that the organization helps communities develop tailored and community-based projects is through their Community Participatory Planning Workshops. These workshops bring together sixty to seventy-five members of the community representing various views, including activists, historians, environmentalists, and civic leaders, who enable the Waterfront Center to pinpoint projects and plans that reflect the needs and desires of the community. What comes out of the workshops is essentially what Ann refers to as “a report card” in the form of more than twenty narrative reports, and a group(s) of committed people who believe in the revitalization of the waterfront area.

Ann says, “One of the most important things that can come out of a Waterfront Center Community Participatory Planning Workshop is getting the community to figure out what they want to do.”

This means discussing the many possible uses for the land ranging from industrial, recreational, and housing. Discussions can encompass many diverse issues, such as affordable housing, conservation, and economic development. The diversity of interests and views can make such meetings contentious, but this is one of the things that Ann relishes – the opportunity to learn and incorporate new ideas. Frequently Ann’s job requires being part philosopher, part

therapist, and part historian. Ann and other staff members help form a bridge between opposing views through mediation and the simple influence of being an “outside” presence.

Another option that the Waterfront Center provides is spot consulting, in which Waterfront Center staff conduct an assessment, and fact-finding includes meeting with as many interested parties as possible. Although this option employs gathering information from various community leaders, it does eliminate the consensus-building workshop session. This can make it more difficult for communities to finalize and approve plans, as project organizers will need to spend more time and effort getting the buy-in of community leaders.

Ann has used both approaches in projects in the Mississippi Valley region with mixed results.

Ann’s commitments to unique and thoughtful approaches to waterfront renewal led to the Urban Waterfront Manifesto. Written in 1999, “The Manifesto” was developed to counter attempts by other organizations to create formulaic approaches to waterfront development. “The Manifesto” considers both planning and development as key aspects for successful urban waterfront renewal. “The Manifesto” states that each aspect must adhere to the idea that every community and every waterfront is unique.


The year 2011 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Waterfront Center, and Ann and the Waterfront Center staff are celebrating this milestone at the upcoming Waterfront Center Conference on October 27-29. This year the conference is actually commemorating two historic events: the thirtieth anniversary of the Waterfront Center and the tenth anniversary of the 2001 annual conference that was held in New York.

The twentieth annual conference was held in Brooklyn just days after the events of September 11. The smoldering ruins of the World Trade

Center Twin Towers and the horrific impact of September 11 had a profound impact on attendees of the twentieth anniversary conference. This year’s attendees will have the opportunity to witness the rebirth of New York’s financial district – a rebirth that mirrors the rebirth of waterfronts to which Ann and her staff have contributed across the globe.

Over the years, Ann and her staff have witnessed many social and technological innovations, and waterfront projects have grown in sophistication and scope. Some of Ann’s favorite projects have included those in our area, but also those in the Tri-Cities of Washington State and in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Ann’s affection for the Tri-Cities projects developed from their demonstration of the power of long-term planning and development. Eleven years after their initial consultation, Ann and Dick were delighted when Tri-State leaders invited them back, and every item on their list of recommendations had been completed. The Wilkes-Barre project holds a special place for Ann because her presentation to their community board led to a reconsideration of their levee wall development to include a public access parkway which let the town garner protection while still providing a means of access and enjoyment.

Recent projects on which Ann has consulted have demonstrated a renewed interest in including historical buildings and artifacts as well as a deeper focus on environmental conservation and other “green issues.” The mandate that Ann remains most committed to, however, is public access. Waterways and waterfronts have always played an important role in civic and industrial development, but they also play a vital role in the psychic and physical history of a region. Ann’s vision and drive over the past thirty years have provided a means to keep waterfronts intact and vibrant for future generations.

For more information on Ann and the Waterfront Center, visit them online at waterfrontcenter.org, or contact them via email at mail@waterfrontcenter.org, via phone at (202) 337-0356, or by snail mail at P.O. Box 53351, Washington D.C. 20009. 



Mingling of the Waters ceremony at annual Waterfront Center Conference.

About the Waterfront Center

The Waterfront Center is a 501(c)(3) organization committed to the idea of waterfronts as unique, finite resources. Since its inception in 1981, the Waterfront Center has been a front-runner in the trend toward urban waterfront renewal and its growth worldwide. The Waterfront Center helps communities of all sizes transform abandoned, underused waterfront areas into vibrant, dynamic areas for parks and trails, residential projects, and industrial activity.

The Waterfront Center believes urban waterfronts make a special contribution to promoting the healthy communities essential for environmental, economic, and social advancement. The goal of the Waterfront Center is to assist community leaders and/or other professionals in making decisions that provide the best long-term uses of waterfront resources.

The Waterfront Center’s co-founders, Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, have written several books on waterfront renewal and are committed to recognizing the achievements of communities from across the globe in the area of waterfront renewal.