

How I Stumbled on a Diamond in the Rough

Bringing New Life to Westchester County's South County Trail

By Steve Pucillo



After moving to Hastings-on-Hudson 13 years ago, I was seeking a safe and flat pathway for in-line skating. I discovered the South County Trail in Hastings-on-Hudson between Farragut Avenue and Lawrence Avenue. The Saw Mill River Parkway abuts the Trail on the left and the Saw Mill River on the right.

At this time it was rather desolate, a bit noisy from traffic and had very little view of the river. Later, after asking residents who walked on the Trail about the river, the response was “what river?”

As my wife Gigi and I settled in to Hastings, I considered different types of volunteer work I might continue in our new community. I resumed tutoring at grammar schools in Yonkers, which has always been fulfilling for me, but I also wanted that outdoor opportunity. In San Diego I had been a volunteer for Baykeepers, a spinoff from Riverkeepers.

In Hastings-on-Hudson I came across Anne-Marie Mitroff, a Director of Groundwork Hudson Valley, a non-profit organization based in Yonkers, who was conducting one of her Fall programs on the South County Trail: vine cutting and planting of trees. After discussing the great work they were doing I became a volunteer.

Very few people knew the river even existed there because of the overgrowth of ornamental vines, wild invasive Multiflora Rose bushes, Porcelain Berry and Mugwort distracting from the river view. Since kayaking and canoeing were in my blood, and as a retiree who wanted to make a contribution to our community in a way that no one else was doing at the time, I decided to jump in — literally! Removing debris, building platforms, boardwalks, and adding wood duck houses led me to create what I came to identify as signature locations. They are places to rest one's tired feet, consisting of a sign that said just that - “rest your tired feet and view the Saw Mill River”, with bird houses, a wood duck house, a pollinating garden and, yes, a bench.





Each location was carefully selected including a section of the river in which it shares a close view from the Trail and also trees for shade with an easy access to the river's edge.

Then here comes COVID-19! As late February 2020 approached, along with the introduction of COVID-19, Groundwork Hudson Valley continued to play an important role in support of my ideas along with the help of other volunteers. Now with 11 signature locations and over 150 bird houses, butterfly homes, wood duck houses and whimsical bird figures, the stage was set for the unexpected. Since my routine calls for me to be on the Trail 2 to 3 days a week year-round, it was easy for me to get to know many who shared the Trail for regular exercise: walking, bike riding jogging and, yes, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing in winter.

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This level of participation by the community and visitors from afar has been both gratifying and encouraging. COVID-19 hit families who were faced with being locked in a home with children unable to go to school. What to do?! Immediately the Trail filled with small bikes, baby carriages, families tightly grouped trying to maintain safe spacing, wearing masks, simply trying to pass the time safely outdoors.

People were taking pictures of the bird houses, families were gathering at benches and simply passing the time. They would carry on conversations. One long-time acquaintance and regular Trail user said to me “you made it too nice”, suggesting there may be too many people coming. I just don't see it that way and I wondered if my friend was not just giving me an indirect approval.



Enthusiastic volunteers were with us from the very beginning. Creating the butterfly gardens was a suggestion by Michelle Babian who was the first to provide me with the idea. Norma Silva helped maintain each of the five pollinating gardens. There were also many great people who joined in from time to time. There was a dedicated bicyclist who stopped by and offered plants. Then there were the benches donated by Lowes Building Supply and Tim Downing of Hastings Landscaping. Lowes Home Center employees volunteered for Groundwork Hudson Valley, giving not only the time of 25 employees but materials to build five benches for the Trail, all approved by Groundwork Hudson Valley and director Brigitte Griswold.



For nearly 8 years Chris of Paul Bunyan Tree Care has been my supplier of wood chips, allowing us to maintain a tidy look to each of the signature locations.

When it came to building materials, I was very lucky thanks to my neighbors. They provided an endless variety of wood, paint, and finishing materials. Using tree climbers rope supplied by Chris at Paul Bunyan I was able to fashion rope railings for platforms at the river's edge, as well as at the same boardwalk in the Meadows location. Some of these flat platforms at the Saw Mill River are used for water testing sponsored by Beczak Center for the Urban River/ Sarah Lawrence College in conjunction with Riverkeeper, a program that has continued for a number of years. My involvement covers six years.

Linda Friedlander, local artist and business executive, has used her talent painting benches and supplies some of our most exciting bird houses. Linda provides an outlet for children in the community to show their talent, painting birdhouses and seeing their finished efforts fastened to trees near their residence on the South County Trail. So many have contributed their time and materials.

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While my involvement came about through Groundwork Hudson Valley, much of the early work was started by Anne-Marie Mitroff, then continued on by Oded Holzinger. The backbone of Groundwork Hudson Valley is our “green team”, the well-trained Groundwork Hudson Valley high school teens from Yonkers. They were sponsored and selected from Yonkers schools by Groundwork Hudson Valley and work throughout the year on local projects. They also travel over the summer to our national parks. This summer they were at Yellowstone

National Park repairing trails and maintaining these wonderful landmarks. They have left an indelible mark on the South County Trail, building additional platforms, clearing vines, planting trees and doing river cleanups. They are training how to be our future conservationists. We are so lucky to have them and the service they provide to our local communities and national parks.

Another very important Hastings-on-Hudson organization has been the Hastings Vine Squad, led by Haven Colgate and Susan Harris. For more than five years the Hastings Vine Squad volunteers have substantially eradicated invasive vines which have plagued the community of Hastings-on-Hudson. Recognizing the South County Trail as part of Hastings-on-Hudson they have made a solid contribution.

“Dedicated to vine removal on a larger scale”

Groundwork Hudson Valley has pulled together what has become known as the Saw Mill River Coalition. This consists of volunteer groups throughout Westchester County, solely dedicated to vine removal, creating a team called “swarms”. These organized gatherings are a coordinated effort by Groundwork Hudson Valley as they pull together each group. They select the day and time at an agreed-upon location that may require a large group which can tackle a large area. These areas have been overtaken by vines capable of pulling down and destroying trees in their surrounding area. The swarms have produced long lasting results. Many communities have expressed their appreciation.

The alliance members consist of Groundwork Hudson Valley, Bob Del Toro of the Bronx River Parkway Reservation Conservancy, local high schools, conservation clubs, Haven Colgate/Susan Harris Hastings Vine Squad, New Rochelle Vinecutters, Bronx River Parkway Recreation Conservancy, Guy Pardee, and Croton Vine Squad. Other groups from Rockland County and Northern New Jersey have also shared in this undertaking.

As I reflect upon my South County Trail experience, my appreciation to all those who have helped make this possible is boundless