

# RIVER VOICES

2017 RIVER HEROES

*July 2017 Issue*

A RIVER NETWORK PUBLICATION

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ACCEPTANCE SPEECH.



THE RIVER HEROES ISSUE



## HEADQUARTERS

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## MISSION, VISION, AND FOCUS

River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life. We envision a future of clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective and courageous champions for our rivers. Our three strategies for focused investment are strong champions, clean water, and ample water.

## IN THIS ISSUE

Everyone loves a hero. We love being inspired by their passion, spirit, and resolve. We love celebrating their success, being moved to tears, and infected by laughter.

When I attended my first River Rally, I was deeply moved by caliber of work taking place across the United States, by the positive and inclusive nature of the conference, and by the deeply moving and inspirational stories of people making extraordinary contributions to a brighter future for our rivers and our communities. I was instantly smitten with the concept of River Heroes and the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity.

We have wanted to make the content of River Rally more accessible for some time. We believe that a more inclusive movement for our rivers requires more voices at the table, including at River Rally. Towards that end, we have expanded our scholarships with the help of funders and found other ways to engage with the communities where River Rally is held. This year for the first time we are also very happy to share some of the magic of River Rally with anyone who has a computer, including the transformative stories of this year's River Heroes, free of charge.

This issue of River Voices features each of our River Heroes—Angie Rosser, Denny Caneff, David Deen, David Sligh, and Margaret Frisbie—through personal profiles and videos of their acceptance speeches. In addition, we have videos of our Compton River Achievement Award winner and the plenaries from the conference. We are incredibly grateful to expand the potential for this content to make a difference, providing an infusion of hope and the elixir of possibility to those who need it most. **Thank you River Heroes and our supporters for making this possible!**

## WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THE STORIES AND THE VIDEOS OF THIS YEAR'S HEROES. HERE ARE A FEW OTHER IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT RIVER NETWORK:

- Keep learning from River Rally! In addition to our River Heroes videos, we are pleased to share:
  - **Plenary: Affordability, Equity, and Drinking Water**
  - **Plenary: Rethinking Our Relationship to Urban Rivers**
  - **Plenary: Lessons from Standing Rock and Beyond**
  - **Compton Award Winner Chairman Archambault II**
- Mark your calendar: River Rally 2018 will be in Olympic Valley, CA on April 29-May 2, 2018. You can now propose a 25 or 90 minute workshop. Check out our 2018 **themes and open call!**
- Great DEI trainings: Missed our webinars? Need a quality professional development opportunity? Check out these informative RN webinars (part **one**/part **two**).
- Support us! Your **donations** and **membership** help keep our community strong.

Let us know what you think and if this content gives you a boost. We think it will.

Nicole Silk, President  
River Network





# MARGARET FRISBIE

*Executive Director, Friends of the Chicago River*

When I was 10 years old, my father and I appeared in the daily newspaper for paddling on a road adjacent to the Des Plaines River just a few miles from my house. Although I didn't know it then, the water was over the road because of a combination of archaic development practices that unthinkingly polluted the river and flooded the communities through which it flowed. What I did know was that a trip down the river with my Dad was a magical adventure and that the small amount of wildlife we saw along its banks was a link to other worlds, inspiring dreams of beavers, bears, and bison and wild places I longed to see.

Paddling with my father was not an uncommon occurrence nor was going door-to-door before an election with my Mom or standing with her on a cool fall evening along our town's busiest road holding "Nuclear Free Zone" signs. Some nights my Dad left for library board meetings and my Mom joined others for fair housing and civil rights—not always a welcome platform in the leafy suburb of my youth.

Growing up in a household of advocates who were willing to go out on a cold winter night for a matter of principal was a great way to learn that you need to stand up for the people (or places or books) who might otherwise not have a voice. So when I had a chance to take a position with Friends of the Chicago River I jumped on it even though I didn't know that much about the river I signed up to help.

The Chicago River system was designed into Chicago's sewer system in the 1850s when the city raised itself out of the swamp on which it had been created. The city was booming and miles of the meandering prairie stream had already been straightened and dredged so adding sewer pipes to drain away the city's filth could barely have been an afterthought. That desecration was just the beginning what was to come for the Chicago River for more than the next 100 years in Chicago and upstream and down.

When I started at Friends, it took me awhile to get my footing. My background was communications not science or law, and I was unfamiliar with the rules and regulations of the Clean Water Act. I didn't know an NPDES permit from Section 303d, and nonpoint source pollution was a mystery to me. But I was excited about the river and hoped that I could help convince people that we could bring it back to life for birds, bats, beavers, muskrats turtles, fish, coyotes, and for people, too. I was determined to figure out how.

The first, best opportunity was to learn was from the people in our office. Eager, dedicated, interested and interesting the employees at Friends taught me a lot about water quality and the river itself. In my first few weeks someone took me on a tour which included a stop on a city riverbank from which I saw a great blue heron perched upon a shopping cart surrounded by eastern spiny soft shelled turtles

and some garbage. A suburban location on the river the same day (with a reconstructed wetland) revealed bullfrog tadpoles. It was quite a contrast.

The next thing was to read everything I could, old reports and new ones, figuring out who did what and who managed what. I read our founding document, “Our Friendless River,” and worked to understand how our river is still alive despite its manipulations and legacy of abuse.

The next piece came together a few years in when I became executive director and began to meet the people from some of Chicago’s top environmental groups. It became clear to me that just like no one bad guy was responsible for polluting the river, no one good guy was going to fix it. It made sense to me that we could achieve much through our own visions, ideas and commitment and if we were willing to listen to and work with other groups.

That willingness to work in honest partnership and push for change no matter who was against you and how powerful they were has truly advanced Friends’ mission to improve and protect the Chicago River. Progress can be measured in species of fish, miles of trail, increasing access, and the fact that people are starting to believe that the Chicago River is no longer part of the sewer system but truly a natural, economic, and recreational asset to our community.



Margaret on Chicago River Day

The reasons I work for the Chicago River are simple. I believe that we all have a right to and require clean safe healthy natural open places no matter who we are, how much money we have, or where we live. I also believe we have a fundamental responsibility to undo the damage we have done to our environment and to recreate healthy, connected habitats for the wildlife where it was destroyed and to protect that which was not. And finally I do it because it is an honor and a profound experience to work with the kind of people who choose to spend their lives improving the air, land, and water so that one day the beavers, bears, bison and all of us have places we can thrive.

[Click here or the box below to watch Margaret Frisbie’s speech.](#)







# DENNY CANEFF

*Executive Director, Superior Hiking Trail Association  
Former Executive Director, River Alliance of Wisconsin*

Some images cannot be erased from your mind because they are reinforced by contextual sounds and smells. So it is for me and the first stirrings I felt about rivers.

Growing up near the Mississippi River at Hastings, Minnesota, in the early 1960s, my family made an outing of going to the Dairy Queen (no cones, only malts or sundaes; they didn't drip on the car seat) and then to Lock and Dam #2 to watch a towboat lock through. There's not much excitement to this tedious process. But for me, taking in the thrum of the diesels; that earthy-funky smell of the river, at once alluring and repulsive; the swirl of insects around the lights; the blinding sweep of the towboat's huge spotlight; and the inscrutable poses of the deck hands on the barge all combined to make for a childhood thrill.

That Mississippi River communion, and a still-inexplicable urge to be on, see, stand by and move on flowing water, have formed me, and formed what I have cared about and what I have done

outdoors for my entire life. That early communion with the Mississippi led to a canoe trip of that river's entire length in 1975, as a college project. Today I marvel at how we did it, as I observe the paddling exploits of current-day Mississippi travelers on social media. People know exactly where they are at all times, and tell the world everything that is on their minds. (I kept a written journal.) They even ask for suggestions for good camping spots on Facebook. But some things never change about traveling that river: it is always in charge of your fate, and many boating parties fail in their attempt to get the Gulf.

You can't grow up on the Mississippi in the 1960s and not realize and appreciate the huge progress we have made in this country for our rivers. Part of my youthful communing with the Mississippi was my cousin and I riding our bikes down a muddy bank and splashing into the river. When my mother picked me up after one of those outings, she said, "You smell like your dad." At one level, I knew that was not a compliment, given my mother's attitude about my father. But it

only occurred to me years later that what she smelled on me, having been immersed in the river, was Scotch tape. My dad worked at a chemical plant operated by the 3M Co., the maker of Scotch tape. His clothes always smelled like Scotch tape. After my swim in the river, I too smelled like Scotch tape; that chemical plant was just 8 miles upriver from where we swam, and our clothes had absorbed its effluent in the river.

In my last few years as executive director of the River Alliance of Wisconsin, I felt like I had effluent clinging to my clothes when I came out of the state Capitol after meeting with legislators or attending hearings. Wisconsin took a hard-right turn in its environmental politics in 2010 that foreshadowed what has come to the whole country. There was, and is, a great conservation tradition in that state. It is one I was proud and pleased to extol and defend.

But I must admit defending it got increasingly distasteful for me. I worked for a family farm advocacy organization for 9 years in the 80s and 90s; we pushed for more environmentally responsible farming practices. Twenty years later at the River Alliance, I was fighting the same battles, with not a lot of progress to show for it. I'm not sure I was giving out good advice to local watershed and river friends groups in Wisconsin in my last months at the River Alliance, telling them to forget "partnering" with farmers, who will co-opt small groups like that with their sincerity, and then turn around and deny and deflect their responsibility



Denny on Gores Islands

to the rivers. It may be time for all-out resistance to agriculture on the part of water advocates.

I'm happy to see young, well-educated water advocates emerging onto the scene, poised and ready to produce that resistance, and to offer new ideas and solutions. My reduced fervor for advocacy and the political arena is not matched by a reduced fervor for flowing water. From my kayak, somewhere in Minnesota or Wisconsin, I will cheer on those advocates and thank them for their efforts to defend our rivers. The pendulum will swing back, and the rivers will be grateful too.

[Click here or the box below to watch Denny Caneff's speech.](#)







# DAVID SLIGH

*Conservation Director, Wild Virginia*

This photo represents a state of being I once held to be perfect and perfectly complete: peaceful, cool, quiet, gently flowing. This little stream is the South Fork Tye River, one of the natural places that feels most like home to me. It arises on the steep eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains, eventually forming part of the James River. It makes sense that I'd feel a kinship with this place and others like it in the western part of Virginia, because nearly all my ancestors have lived in this region since the mid-1700s. Why would I want to be anywhere else?

I was quiet—very quiet—when I was young. I sought mellow, not spice. I preferred soft and gentle. Clashes were anathema.

I spent time in the forests and streams and I wanted to learn more and more about nature. I prized going “over in the mountains” with my grandparents to fish and just enjoy the peace and beauty. As a Boy Scout, I hiked and camped and soaked in a sense of wonder and I learned the most basic concept about the world that too many still seem unable to grasp or unwilling to acknowledge; that everything is connected and to injure or destroy one piece is to cause chain reactions of harm and danger. I decided to become an environmental scientist, to increase my understanding and work to heal the

wounds I saw. Surely, that role was a constructive way to have a positive influence while holding on to the peace and serenity I valued so highly.

But as I looked at the world more closely and farther from home, I began to see the cruelties, the inequities, and the destructive forces that you can't miss in this world if your eyes are open. When I read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* I felt a sense of outrage and anger about the atrocities visited on native Americans and I had no idea how to channel those feelings. I learned about the cruelties of slavery and the long string of abuses of African Americans that was still so blatantly rampant in the 1960s and '70s as I grew into my teens. I saw the imbalances between people with power and money and those without and the politicians who fed off this system and maintained it.

The two threads seemed, at first, like separate strands that needn't and maybe shouldn't be intertwined. I could rail against the injustices “out there” but, if I was going to be a credible scientist, shouldn't I maintain as much objectivity in my work as possible?

In the end, I was driven to combine these apparently conflicting impulses and, strangely, the tension itself helped me find fulfillment, excitement, and passion, but also peace.

From the summer after my second year in college until I was nearly thirty-five years old, I worked in a series of jobs with the Virginia state water quality protection agency. At first, in my own mind, I was primarily a scientist and my mission was to discover and report the truth about how humans affect aquatic ecosystems. I value and honor this role and I understand the belief many hold that science is “tainted” when the practitioner also becomes an advocate. But, to me, to find the truth could not be the end of the process—not if I was to have the best chance to make the world better. I could not just observe the degradation. I had to act. And while I maintain my sense of outrage at the many inequities and offenses, at civil rights denied and inhumanity, I felt I had to focus my best efforts on just one area of attention. This is how I became a water quality warrior.

As a government worker, I made a transition in outlook from scientist to regulator. By my definition, a regulator is one who takes the facts and the law and uses them to serve the public and the principles on which our environmental laws are based. The defense of integrity in natural systems and in the formation and implementation of public policy is the highest goal.

In the early 1990s I began to see that my concept of the role of government, to protect our streams and to serve the wider public interests, was under attack. I was ordered by my bosses to slant the science and betray the law and I resisted. After waging a running battle with my own agency that lasted nearly two

years, in which I refused to attest to the correctness of water discharge permits that were illegal, I left state government. I left with a bang. I resigned in protest against the dishonesty of supposed “public servants” and subversion of a system I revered. I was now square in the middle of a roiling, noisy, battle.

After I left government over two decades ago, I went to law school to gain weapons to make the science and the truth count in situations where they can too easily be swept aside. I’ve worked for national, regional, and local advocacy groups as a lawyer and as a scientist. I waded into battles for clean water with joy and am not accused of being quiet or peaceful in these efforts. Controversy is my friend, because it helps bring sunlight to dark places. Constructive friction can wear away the jagged edges of inequity and the quiet abuses of “the way things are.”

Have I abandoned that beautiful, quiet, peaceful ideal represented by the photo above? No! It still exists in nature and in my heart and I visit it and value it as much as I can. But I know also that a stream in flood or drought is just as natural as is the serene environment that’s so soothing and pleasant on a hot summer day. Streams in tumult and violent motion are also necessary and constructive forces in nature. In the same way, a life spent in the flashing currents and the crashing waves can bring peace and fulfillment and justice. I’ll never again be satisfied just staying on the bank or floating lazily with the gentle currents. Bring on the storms.

[Click here or the box below to watch David Sligh’s speech.](#)







# DAVID DEEN

*Representative, Vermont Legislature*

My river advocacy started a long time ago caused by the charged pull through the bamboo pole with its tip tied line connecting to a red and white oblong bobber that telegraphed that the fish took the worm. Yanking the Blue Gill to shore started the learning process of what do you do with a fish you want to return to the water. The spikey dorsal fin taught an instant and memorable lesson about sharpness and fish defenses.

I was hooked and fishing became a favorite activity that used up any time and energy not needed for family, work, or learning. There were a few late teenage years when young women distracted me, but that was short lived, and I soon returned to fishing as the natural hub of life.

Over time, my fishing techniques transformed from bait, to lures, culminating with becoming a catch and release fly fisher for over 40 years now. Soon after turning the corner to fly fishing, I began to tie my own flies. The first results were visually laughable but inexplicably caught fish. One increases ones fly tying skills partially by reading books on technique. The best of those books discuss the biology of the fly you are working on and with the reading you soon begin to understand the connection between healthy water, a healthy food chain, and more fish.

Fishing served as the private outlet during the professional years of community, union, and political organizing with VISTA, organized labor, Community Action, and political candidates. Eventually all those professional duties wore thin and the upshot was to become a fly fishing guide. You cannot be hired to be a guide since guiding businesses in Vermont and New Hampshire are pretty much one-person businesses, so Strictly Trout Guide Service was born. My 25 years of on river guiding became a classroom to impart knowledge about clean water to my guests.

In the political world, my first run for the state legislature was as a sacrificial lamb since no Democrat had ever been elected to the Vermont Senate from Windham County in the entire history of the state of Vermont. Well to everyone's amazement, I won. I lost my reelection for the Senate race but returned to the House where I have served since 1991.

Feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the environmental issues facing me on my assigned natural resources committees, I went back to school for a MS in environmental science and the new degree helped in the legislative arena and led to becoming the river steward for the upper Connecticut River watershed from the





David Deen fly casting clinic

Massachusetts's border to the Canadian border. If it flowed through Vermont or New Hampshire into the Connecticut River I was concerned about what was happening or could happen to that water.

There is an old bromide that it takes three jobs to make a living in Vermont. So, for 15 years I chaired the Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources Committee in the Vermont House, worked as river steward, and ran my fly fishing guide business. I had my three jobs and they were all wet!

The reach of the Connecticut River I served is 275 miles long with a watershed that exceeded 8,000 sq. miles in Vermont and New Hampshire, clearly a daunting task. Fortunately, long before I began serving as the river steward earlier work resulted in some important allies.

In the mid-1980s, a few of us diehard fishers organized the Connecticut River Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited. The organization continues to this day and it along with the Vermont and New Hampshire Trout Unlimited State Councils are strong and active allies in the work to protect the river.

In 1988 in the Vermont Senate, I was cosponsor of and the floor manager for a bill that created the Connecticut River Watershed Advisory Commission. In the years between my service in the Senate and the House I was appointed

chair of the Vermont Commission and reached across the river to the newly formed New Hampshire Connecticut River Valley Resource Commission to form the Connecticut River Joint Commission (CRJC), a nonprofit whose board included all the governmental and NGO members of the two state Commissions. It became and is a powerful voice in the valley and because of my long history with the organization they are a key ally in protecting the river.

It takes teamwork to be successful and at a recent retirement celebration from the Connecticut River Watershed Council (CRWC), seeing the regulators, funders, watershed advocates, CRWC members, colleagues at CRWC, legal advocates, professors, legislators, and just plain citizens present reminded me that all of them at one time or another were critical partners with me in protecting the river. These people and organizations in and out of the watershed are a team that interacts with citizens, towns, state government, regional planning, state legislatures and the two Governors to help the river.

As David Rosgen said, "We don't make many mistakes with rivers. We just keep making the same ones." In some ways that sums up the issues facing the Connecticut River. There are sometimes unauthorized discharges of pollutants and sometimes the discharge is inappropriately authorized by a NPDES permit; the stripping of naturally vegetated riparian zones by development





or agriculture; improper use of river toys that bring aquatic invasive species to the watershed; the wholesale trashing of the river with tires, appliances and other threats to water quality and safety; and then there were the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and Nuclear Regulatory Commission licenses for major power producers that either dammed the river or discharged huge amounts of hot water, neither helping the health of the river.

My work is to stop the unauthorized discharges and when necessary challenge the authorizing permits. I spent nearly two decades dealing with FERC licenses, many NPDES permits each year, removing dams, stabilizing stream banks, organizing river cleanups, and where there were holes in legal protections for our waterways, passed water quality protection legislation. When not engaged with these activities I entice active river participation, educate about the river, and otherwise motivate people to use and protect our treasured river.

[Click here or the box below to watch David Deen's speech.](#)





  
**SAFE WATER**  
FOR WEST VIRGINIA

**Safe Water  
Depends on Us.**

Learn What We Can Do.

## ANGIE ROSSER

*Executive Director, West Virginia Rivers Coalition  
West Virginia Headwaters Waterkeeper*

From a very young age, I wanted to be in water. When I saw water, I went to it. There is something elemental about my connection to water. It engages all the senses. The sound of water, the sight of water, the smell of it, the feel of it—all calm me.

My childhood vacations were organized around water, like swimming in the ocean, fishing before dawn, and time at my grandparents' lake house, where every window looked out to the water.

Spending time with my grandmother's National Geographic magazine collection, early on I became conscious that there was a much bigger world than the one I knew. I loved seeing pictures of people who looked nothing like me. I wanted to go to these places, meet the people.

The water, the comfort of the lake house, and the people in the magazines all worked to create an awareness of injustice in the world. It was hard for me to fathom that there were people who couldn't enjoy water, who were poor. Why are some people poor and others not, and why don't we all have the same?

I realized I was a fish out of water; I was in the wrong place. I wanted to be where I could help people who needed it most. So I began

my college years in pre-med, planning to become a doctor in a developing country.

By the time we got to the pig dissection, though, I understood I wasn't cut out to practice medicine. I wouldn't be a doctor, but I still wanted to be a healer. I started taking classes that truly interested me—other people, other cultures, looking for something that binds us, what we all have in common.

I traveled to Africa as part of my studies. The women there taught me so much. They were not disconnected from nature. They were rooted in it by necessity. The ancient framework of fire, water, air, and earth—these were part of their everyday lives. They carried water miles every day from a thinly running stream; they honored water. It just made sense to me, and it comforted me to know I come from something that has existed from the beginning.

In early adulthood, I wasn't sure how it would all play out, but I discovered that being outdoors and being in nature was the best thing for me. I'd always loved being in nature and water; now I understood it was fundamental to my own happiness. I also knew that my working life would focus on justice-making.





Captivated by West Virginia's natural beauty, I like to say I moved here as soon as I could. I would spend 16 years working to help women and children who were victims of domestic violence. I saw violence enabled by power imbalances in interpersonal relationships. I also saw the power imbalances of citizens in my state relative to the extractive industries. I got to know all kinds of activists, some who were fiercely trying to protect West Virginia's people, lands and waters from the destructive impacts of the coal industry.

The more I learned, the more concerned I grew. Then came the moment in the state capitol; I witnessed a man testify that he could no longer see the stars because of the lights of a well pad. It made my heart ache and cry, "No one should be able to take away our stars!" That man took me to where we could see 11 fracking sites from one hilltop. The rural and scenic values of what I loved about my state were being taken away. And it wasn't just mountaintops or streams being destroyed, it was our people's way of life. I started hearing stories of West Virginians in a different way. They spoke of

loss—about losing their fishing hole, their ginseng patch, their water well, access to their family cemetery, because some industry had taken it away.

I had to get involved. Having worked all those years for the rights of women and children to feel safe at home, taking away the right to enjoy peaceful stargazing at home seemed like a violation as well. It felt criminal. The victims of these violations were similarly silenced by fear, powerlessness, and invisibility.

I've always been a fan of the underdog. That probably has a lot to do with why I'm here. The people of West Virginia deserve more. If I am privileged to be positioned to be a voice for those unable to speak, I must. It's not easy. We often lose. But we know we're on the right side.

The 2014 chemical leak that left 300,000 West Virginians without access to safe water was shattered the power structure, for a moment. It takes only a few days without safe water to feel utterly vulnerable and powerless. Speaking truth



Angie at Lake Sherwood

had to acknowledge the suffering that West Virginia has been subjected to over time and exposure of the rigged system that benefits powerful polluters over the safety and rights of its citizens.

This experience amplified for me that we need to work for clean water as a basic human right. It is a civil rights issue, not just an environmental issue. It is our moral imperative.

I love rivers. I'm gazing at the Elk River as I write these words, and my heart is full. But I know this work is so much more than rivers.

It's about changing the world. We're part of the movement for equity, fairness—and joy!

I can't help but think that if everyone appreciated the beauty of the world and the rights of others to safety and happiness, waters will run clean. One day people will break free from the bonds of power and control exercised over them. They will claim their right to safety and fairness. In their homes, their communities, their lives.

Whatever part I might play in this transformational awakening is an honor.

[Click here or the box below to watch Angie Rosser's speech.](#)







## MISSION, VISION, AND FOCUS

River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life. We envision a future of clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective and courageous champions for our rivers. Our three strategies for focused investment are strong champions, clean water, and ample water.

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