Ann

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.

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...
Ann defines the center taking a “holistic approach”... by looking at outcomes and changes that encompass both conservation and economic development.

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 Manifest. Written in 1999, “The Manifesto” was developed to counter approaches 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 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.