

Gathering Our Voice | Leading the way on Wenatchee's riverfront

by Nancy Warner | Aug. 7, 2014, 7:32 p.m. | [Comment](#)



World file photo

A "Do Not Dump Refuse" sign was among the items Ruth Allan and others found during a September 1967 riverfront cleanup near the boat launch area in Wenatchee. Allan led the Allied Arts Council's river beautification project.



Dreaming big and delivering on a shared vision typically involves a lot of different people working together for a long period of time, especially when their goal is counter to the norm. Such was the case when a small group of arts supporters, including artist Ruth Allan, began envisioning ways to enhance Wenatchee's riverfront in the mid- to late-1960s.

Chris Rader interviewed Ruth in 2009 for Gathering Our Voice about her role in the early community efforts to cleanup, protect and celebrate the waterfront. Excerpts from the full interview, transcribed by AmeriCorps volunteer Amanda Gott, follow.



Born in 1931, Ruth grew up in Mukilteo where she said she was used to having the landscape of Puget Sound “around her shoulders.” While she had spent one summer in Wenatchee staying with her uncle and packing cherries, she didn’t make her home here until 1953 when she and her husband came to raise their family.

She remembered how disconnected the community was from the river. “I don’t think they used it,” she said, adding that “it was really a phenomenon, to see anyone on the river.”

And while the confluence of the Wenatchee and Columbia rivers was “quite untouched,” Ruth remembered how the riverfront at that time “had been the city dump forever.” She laughed, recalling how “there were pipes with flame coming out of them” caused by the release of methane gas from the decomposing garbage.

In spite of this scene, Ruth, Joan VanDivort and others who formed the North Central Washington Allied Arts Council, saw possibilities in protecting Wenatchee’s waterfront. “A lot of community leaders were participating at that time,” Ruth recalled.

By 1967, the future of Wenatchee’s waterfront was in danger of being permanently changed.

“The city had managed to get urban arterial funds to create Russell-Ferry Street,” Ruth said, describing federal funds available to make traffic in cities more efficient. “They were very excited to do another project and run a truck bypass all along the Wenatchee riverfront.”

While Ruth said she didn’t see herself as a leader, VanDivort appointed her to be the riverfront chairman for the Allied Arts Council. She remembered getting people from many different areas involved, including Chelan County PUD Commissioner Kirby Billingsley, “who was behind this a lot.”

By 1970, the Allied Arts Council created the Columbia River Environmental Study Team (CREST), which was able to “stop the urban arterial funds from sealing off the riverfront in Wenatchee,” Ruth explained. CREST then worked with others “to create a plan from dam to dam, both sides of the river,” that would help people access and enjoy the place, she said.

The actions of Allied Arts and CREST provided a path many would follow, culminating in the opening of the Apple Capital Recreation Loop Trail in 1998. Reflecting on her role in this success Ruth offered that it was “just persistence and enthusiasm and the ability to connect with people on their level.”

It was also a matter, she added, of tapping into the community network. “When we’d have a project going, someone would know someone” who could help with some aspect of it, “and the momentum would grow,” she remembered. “A small community” like Wenatchee, she added, “makes it happen a lot. People have discovered the power that they have to contribute and just do it.”

To read the transcript of this interview see gatheringourvoice.org To listen to excerpts of this and other interviews and learn more about the history of the Loop Trail see the Listening Post Network at <http://bycell.co/bkyl>. Contact the IRIS office at irisncw@gmail.com or 509-888-7374 to learn how you can help gather the story of our region.
