

An appreciation of Kinsey Potter: 'She was just a force'



Kinsey Potter, who died Sept. 15, leaves a deep legacy for area waterways through her efforts building organizations and nurturing leaders. (Courtesy photo)



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About 15 years ago the [South River Federation](#) was a fledgling group of citizens trying to organize their efforts to save their river. And the idea to create a permanent source of money to restore Anne Arundel's watersheds was just talk.

Then Kinsey Potter came along.

Over the next decade her guiding hand molded the federation into the premier watershed group in the Chesapeake Bay region with paid staff, formal offices, solid science and a deep commitment to preservation that secured funding for and implemented about \$20 million worth of restoration projects in the watershed.

And Potter was a key player in shepherding the idea of a dedicated source of money for the law creating the Watershed Protection and Restoration Program, and fighting the efforts to first veto the bill and then repeal it.

Then she turned to the Watershed Stewards Academy, which Sunday celebrates its 10th anniversary graduating — yet another class of trained watershed advocates — and helped grow that, too.

Later she and Bob Gallagher formed the Anne Arundel County Chapter of the Maryland League of Conservation Voters to encourage candidates and note those with strong environmental bonafides.

And she did all that in retirement from a business career after surviving the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center — and while battling the metastatic [breast cancer](#) that took her life Sept. 15 in her sleep.

She would have eschewed credit for the good works, noting she had plenty of help from others, and she did. But her steadfast example, no-nonsense approach, sense of strategic plan and personal touch, and boundless energy remains a model to those who follow.

Her legacy will be measured in swimmable, fishable waters throughout Anne Arundel County's 12 watersheds restored by thousands of projects large and small, public awareness and her pluck.

It will also live on through a group of organizations led by a generation of leaders she molded by recognizing potential, demanding commitment and giving opportunity.

Drew Koslow was the first South Riverkeeper and the South River Federation's first hire.

“She imprinted on us that we were to become a professional organization. She set standards, expectations of me and the board,” said Koslow, who now runs a nonprofit working with farmers on the Eastern Shore to reduce water pollution.

She led people to think big, he said. In a work session to develop a working list of potential watershed restoration projects, she pushed them to include “big, hairy, audacious” plans, to go big or go home, Koslow recalled.

“We came up with 75 prioritized projects,” he said. “Then she hired people like Erik Michelsen and Kirk Mantay to get it done.”

All 75 projects have been implemented, Koslow said, including the two most audacious: the major restoration project in the headwaters of Church Creek, and the project to restore a large section of Broad Creek near the Park and Ride lot off Harry S. Truman Parkway.

“She had an eye for talent, a capacity from her business career,” Koslow said. “And she gave us the tools, the avenue and encouragement to go out and do it.”

He continued, “She was just a force.”

Michelsen had been working for Underwood and Associates, one of the earliest companies doing streambed restoration work, and volunteering with the South River Federation when Potter tapped him to take the reins as executive director.

“I had not contemplated that at the time. I was not sure I was suited for it that early in my career,” he said. “But she was able to see something in me that maybe I didn’t see in myself at that point.”

With the support of staff and an engaged board of directors, “I was able to rise to the occasion as a result of her support, her mentorship and guidance.”

And after serving as executive director at SRF under Potter’s wing, he applied for and landed the job to direct the county Watershed Protection and Preservation Program.

Long before Chris Trumbauer became an Anne Arundel County councilman, he was a volunteer, then board member, at SRF. Soon he was off to become the West/Rhode Riverkeeper.

“Kinsey was a real mentor to me at that time. She was able to leverage other’s talents and get people involved, giving them responsibility and amplifying individual effort,” he told *The Capital* when Potter won the Ellen Fraites Wagner Award from the Chesapeake Bay Trust.

“When you think about someone like Kinsey passing, you tend to think about their legacy,” Trumbauer said last week. “And her legacy is going to be there for a long time in those organizations.”

Diana Muller came on board as the South Riverkeeper to form a solid scientific foundation of legally defensible scientific data to forward the federation’s arguments on behalf of the watershed.

“She had a unique ability to listen, to cut through the noise to get to (the core) of problems,” Muller said. “She was a strong female role model. She told me to get over myself and do it.”

Muller, who has been battling breast cancer this year, said she was even more in awe of the energy and leadership Potter exhibited with a more devastating prognosis. “I just went through it and realized all the energy it took. She gave me the backbone to go get it done.”

Bob Gallagher, who founded the West/Rhode Riverkeeper based on the example of the South River Federation’s stepped-up presence under Potter’s leadership, practiced law before retiring and was amazed at her work ethic.

“She was always over prepared,” he wrote in a guest column in *The Capital* last week. “She always sought partnerships in the environmental and business communities. When she committed to do something, she did it, and if you committed to do something, she followed up and made sure you did it.”

When Suzanne Etgen presented the idea for the Watershed Stewards Academy to a group of leaders including Potter, she found her future mentor in doubt. “She said, ‘It sounds like a good idea but it will never work, you’ll never get people to sign up for a year of training and that work.’”

“Nevertheless she became part of the founding board and served on all the committees.”

When the first year’s class of Master Watershed Stewards graduated, Potter was hooked and went to work even harder.

“The Watershed Stewards would not be what they are today without her,” Etgen said.

But as others who were touched by Potter’s hand attest, she not only grew organizations but people, too.

“I was so lucky to work under her wing. It was life-changing. She was with me for every twist and turn,” Etgen said. “Kinsey had faith in the model and in me as a person. She pushed people beyond their comfort zone and was 100 percent sure you could achieve your goal.

“She leaves an amazing legacy.”