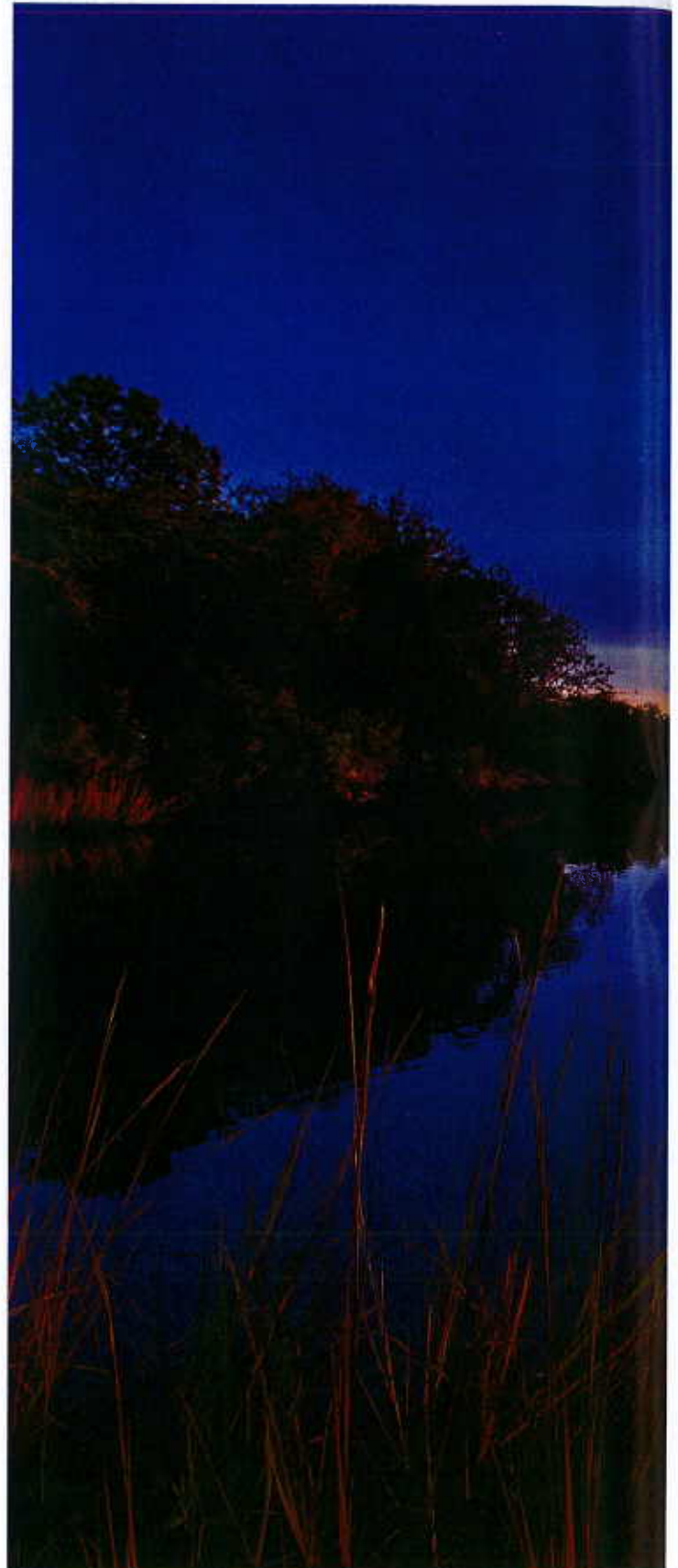


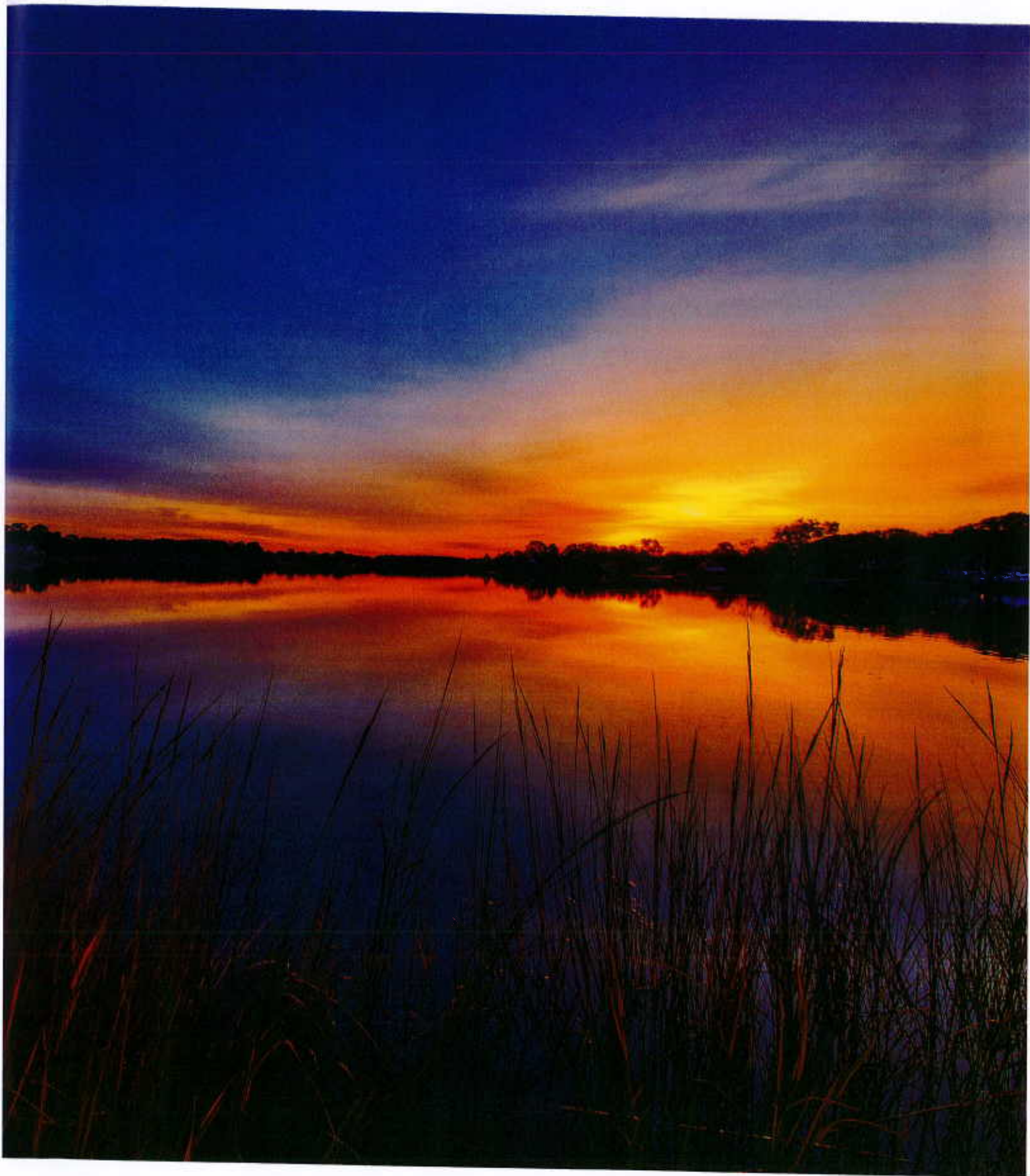
THE NEW REALISTS

THE IMPOSSIBLE JOB

THEY THOUGHT THE ELIZABETH
RIVER WAS HOPELESS.
MARJORIE MAYFIELD JACKSON
PROVED THEM WRONG.

by DIANE TENNANT
photography by ERIC LUSHER







Twenty-six years ago, herons redirected Marjorie Mayfield Jackson's life.

One was a night heron, nesting in a mulberry tree in her backyard along the Elizabeth River. The other was a great blue heron, stalking fish in the shallows.

Jackson had been feeling unfulfilled in her newspaper reporting job and wanted to make a difference in the world.

"At that time, the studies were coming out about cancer in the fish in the Elizabeth River," Jackson says. "And you know, people told me the river was dead. They didn't even know the name of it. It was just 'that sewer' to them, that hopeless sewer. But where I lived it was beautiful, and obviously very much alive. It just came to me that what I really wanted to do with my life was clean up the river."

One woman sitting in her yard became four people gathered around a kitchen table, discussing solutions. From that simple origin rose the Elizabeth River Project, a collaboration of businesses, industry, government and citizens that has become an international model for collective action.

What started as a volunteer effort now operates with a staff of 14 and an annual budget of \$2.8 million. More important, the river is cleaner. Tons of hazardous material have been dredged from some of the most polluted spots on the river bottom. Cancer levels in fish have dropped from 81 percent to less than 4 percent in key hotspots. The variety of fish and animal species in those locations has increased from four to 26. Abandoned vessels have been removed, a park created, pollution-filtering wetlands restored.

Jackson has done the impossible.
And she isn't finished.

The Elizabeth River had a reputation, and it wasn't a good one. It was one of the most polluted waterways in the country. Its shores were lined with heavy industry, its bottom pocked with hazardous sludge. Bacterial contamination had led to the banning of shellfish harvesting since the mid-1920s.

The federal Clean Water Act of the 1970s

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– MARJORIE MAYFIELD JACKSON

required permits and set minimum standards for discharges into the river, but the big problem on the Elizabeth was legacy pollution – creosote and other hazardous waste that had gone into the river years earlier.

"The government was doing what it could," Jackson says, "but there was no community effort or interest at the time, which was what made it so exciting to me. It was this impossible thing."

The Elizabeth River Project didn't file any lawsuits. It didn't accuse anyone of anything and it didn't

demand penalties or stricter regulations. It simply asked people to do the right thing for the river.

“The first decision that we made, and central to us ever since, was to decide – and this was radical at the time – to be a collaborative, non-finger-pointing environmental effort,” Jackson says. “We thought on this river, one of the most industrialized in America, with the world’s largest navy base, the world’s largest coal exporting facility, you’re not going to put the cow back in the barn. You’re going to have to work positively with the powerful interests on the river.

“There’s always some point where interests coincide between somebody who is potentially impacting the river and those of us who are trying to restore it. You just try to find that common ground.”

ERP started by asking people whether they would support a cleanup. Enough citizens and businesses said yes to earn a small planning grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. Jackson and a small group of volunteers used it to recruit 120 people to form committees representing science and technology, business, government, and private citizens. Each committee prepared reports about the river’s problems and possible solutions, and presented them to all the other committees.

Through work sessions and overnight retreats, clam bakes and beer, people who might have been traditional adversaries got to know each other, came to understand each other’s point of view and, after four years of work, created the first action plan for cleaning up the river.

The plan was presented to the public in 1996 by famed CBS broadcaster Charles Kuralt, before 400 people at Nauticus, overlooking the river. It was so thorough that the state adopted the document as its official plan, too, including its 18 priorities for action.

More recent plans have narrowed the focus – the 2016 Watershed Action Plan has just five priorities. But with the initial blueprint in hand, and consensus all around, the ERP was ready to dive in and get started.

First came River Star Businesses, an ERP program that started in 1997 and was designed to assist and advise businesses in the watershed on how best to incorporate habitat protection into their business plans.

It started small, on the river’s Southern Branch, with one shipyard restoring a wetland on its property. Now 114 businesses volunteer to restore wildlife habitat or reduce pollution. They are publicly recognized and applauded for their efforts each year.



Phil Stedfast, operations manager for energy company Kinder Morgan, obtained his employer’s permission to work with ERP to restore about 15 acres of upland forest and wetlands on company property. Schoolchildren were involved, too, growing marsh grasses in their classrooms and planting them in the spring.

Stedfast, who is now vice president of ERP’s board of directors, enjoys the educational aspects of such projects.

“It reflects well on the company, it’s good for morale, and it’s good for the immediate area and

the environment,” he says. “There are five Kinder Morgan locations I’m working with to try to help them get some sort of project going.”

Next came River Star Homes, a program designed to reduce runoff. Because the Elizabeth River Project can document that River Star Homes reduces pollution, grant funding has come in for cost-sharing on yard makeovers. To enroll, homeowners agree to simple steps such as limiting use of fertilizers on lawns, cleaning up after their dogs, and not pouring grease down the sink. To date, 3,200 homes have become River Stars.

On the Learning Barge, Sarah Brennan helps Christopher Academy students learn. Other programs help homeowners cut runoff, and businesses work habitat protection into their business plans.

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THE SUCCESSES ARE SATISFYING TO JACKSON, BUT SHE AND HER PARTNERS AREN'T DONE. THE ERP IS STARTING WORK ON THE RIVER'S EASTERN BRANCH, INCLUDING INDIAN RIVER AND BROAD CREEK, WHICH HAVE HIGH LEVELS OF FECAL BACTERIA.

In 2009, the project debuted the Learning Barge, a solar- and wind-powered traveling wetlands classroom where about 6,000 schoolchildren a year learn environmental stewardship.

“Educating the children who inherit the river is pretty important,” Jackson says. Designed by the University of Virginia, the Learning Barge recently received a \$500,000 grant, one of five given nationwide by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to teach about sea-level rise.

The biggest cleanup so far exemplifies the Elizabeth River Project’s win-win approach. When APM Terminals wanted to dredge 10 million cubic yards from one of the cleanest parts of the river to build a port facility, it set aside \$5 million to pay for another dredging project dear to Jackson’s heart – the removal of tons of contaminated sediment from the river bottom at Money Point.

The point, on the river’s Southern Branch, was a cancer hotspot, in part because of creosote that flowed into the river during an industrial fire in 1963. The ERP had been trying to raise public interest and awareness with the slogans “The Goo Must Go” and “Ask Me About Elizabeth’s Bottom” but lacked funds for the massive cleanup.

“The normal approach would be sue, blame, fight,” Jackson says. “We tried to think about what we could do so the river would still come out ahead, but APM Terminals would get its facility.”

With more than \$2 million in public and private grants added to the company’s millions, the most contaminated regions were dredged, clean sand put down, wetlands planted and oysters restored. Animal life has rebounded and cancer rates in fish have plummeted. ERP has spent more than \$7 million on Money Point, and its business partners have spent an additional \$3 million on related cleanups.

Impressed, the Environmental Protection Agency asked ERP to write a guidebook about its methods. That 82-page book, *Balancing Industry and the Environment: How to Achieve Win-Win on the Industrial Waterfront*, was published in 2008.

Since then, groups from around the world have contacted ERP for guidance and advice on cleanup projects of their own, and the Stanford Social Re-

view, in 2011, cited the ERP as one of the country’s best examples of getting disparate interests to work together on a community project.

The successes are satisfying to Jackson, but she and her partners aren’t done.

The ERP is starting work on the river’s Eastern Branch, including Indian River and Broad Creek, which have high levels of fecal bacteria. Stormwater runoff is a problem, washing oil and dirt from roads and other paved areas, and fertilizers and pesticides from treated yards. The cities are pitching in to help, looking for leaks in aging sewer pipelines.

All these problems are complicated by municipal stormwater drains, which were designed decades ago to carry runoff as quickly as possible into the river, without filtering.

Still, Jackson is happy with Paradise Creek Nature Park, a restored area just south of the Jordan Bridge, which the Elizabeth River Project created and donated to the city of Portsmouth for public use and education. The Money Point cleanup is a tremendous satisfaction. So is reducing bacteria in the Lafayette to the extent that that branch of the Elizabeth has been removed from the state’s list of impaired waters.

“Some things are less tangible,” Jackson says, “like the fact that nobody ever tells me the river’s dead anymore. And people do know its name. So just to have shifted how people feel about their home river, and all the thousands of schoolchildren who now grow up wanting to be good river stewards instead of thinking they live on a sewer, and all these homeowners, thousands of them, who are feeling empowered to do the right thing in their own yards. It’s exciting.”

Frank Daniel has seen the effort from both sides. He joined the group’s board as soon as he retired from his job as regional director for the state Department of Environmental Quality. The project’s dedication is outstanding, he says, from the board to the staff to its executive director, Jackson.

“And that’s what it takes,” he says. “It takes a bunch of people believing in something and coming together, and putting the effort forward. That’s been the story of the Elizabeth River Project from the beginning.” ■