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CITIZEN-TIMES

VOICE OF THE MOUNTAINS • CITIZENTIMES.com

March 30, 2013

Environmental activist shifts to filmmaking

By Karen Chávez

HENDERSONVILLE — Growing up in the coalfield of Brookside, with a giant landfill as his only mountain view, David Weintraub was a city boy who had a tree-hugging inner child just waiting to see the sunlight.

He took some twists and turns on the road from New York City to the mountains of Western North Carolina, but once Weintraub settled in the small Henderson County town of Flat Rock, the city kid knew he was home.

Weintraub found his love for the outdoors, wild places and rural living in the past 15 years as executive director of the Environmental and Conservation Organization, better known as ECO. Today is Weintraub's last day, heading up the 26-year-old group that works to preserve Henderson County's natural heritage through focusing on green infrastructure, water quality, energy conservation, renewable energy and recycling.

"I'm stepping down from ECO. I thought to be balanced, you need to use the right and left brain, so I'm going to pursue the right side of my brain," said Weintraub, 54, referring to his new pursuit heading



Weintraub shoots an interview with a Henderson County elder for his film on mountain heritage.

bear. It was a totally different world from where we lived in a public housing area, surrounded by concrete," Weintraub said.

"My forest was telephone poles and being chased by packs of dogs. It was as far from nature as you can imagine."

"The most remarkable part of my childhood was growing to that hot, concrete place. I knew what I wanted to raise my child in a place where he was connected to nature, with a sense of community, where people huddled and cared about each other."

Weintraub worked as a community organizer in Philadelphia, then earned a law degree and worked on civil rights cases in South Florida. He enjoyed the issues but not working with the judicial system, he said.

He also found an arts and cultural center in Florida, the Center for Yiddish Culture, which sponsored comedy and literary events, produced books and offered educational projects for children. That led to the creation of his first documentary film, "Where None Go to Die: Yiddish Culture in South Beach."

While in Florida, Weintraub and his wife, Liza Weintraub, now a nurse at Mission Hospital, often vacationed in WNC. They became members of ECO, which started out as a hiking club.

The couple and their son, Jonah, now 10, moved to Flat Rock in 2005. David began volunteering with ECO's Green River water quality monitoring team. When former executive director Mary Jo Padgett moved in 2007, he took the job.

Advocating small growth

ECO, founded in 1987 by friends who wanted to get out into the woods, evolved into much more.

The group realized the need for more hiking trails and secured funding and materials to build a nature trail in Jackson Park, worked with the Carolina Mountain Club to build many miles of trails in the Green River Gorge Lands, protected by the state in the early '90s, and published a brochure about the environmental organization.

People were getting out into nature more but were becoming appalled by the out-of-control development in a county with no zoning laws, Weintraub said. ECO worked with local landowners and farmers in 2007 to launch a building moratorium campaign. A land development code was passed to insure building rules were instituted for smart growth.

Now, abandoned development is one of the biggest environmental issues facing the county, Weintraub said.

"The poster child in this community is Seven Falls," he said, and the notoriously unfinished luxury housing development that was planned to accommodate 900 homes and an Arnold Palmer-designed golf course on 1,400 acres.

"We noticed something very wrong from the beginning, since ECO was doing water quality monitoring at Little Willow Creek, which borders where much of the construction was going," Weintraub said.

"The 'big boom' went down by 80 percent, and now it's a dead stream. We tried working with the developer to fix the problems, worked with the county commissioners to force the developer to not to do the project, and then we sued them. We have many ECO members who live in this community who find their property flooded after major rains as a result of the developer's negligence."

ECO is joining the county in a lawsuit to get the court approval to start "fixing the flooding."

Uniting a community

One of the most recent projects Weintraub got ECO involved in was the Mills River Partnership, which he said is one of his proudest accomplishments at the environmental organization.

In 2007, there was a major fish kill in Mills River, a world-class trout stream also important as the drinking water source for Mills River. Hendersonville residents and some from surrounding County, the fish kill highlighted the sensitive position caused by runoff from agricultural operations, caused by plowing the river for the past decade.

"We said, this is a stream we all care about. How can we all work together to solve this problem? Landowners, municipalities, farmers, we all want together and had serious discussions," Weintraub said.

The result was the Mills River Partnership, a nonprofit with a wide variety of stakeholders who all want to protect the river.

"The Mills River Partnership is the first time I've seen environmental groups like ECO and business leaders and the farm bureau sitting at the same table and all of the same issues and the same agenda," said Shann Moore, watershed coordinator with Henderson County Soil and Water District.

"It would be hard to find anything that David may have contributed that will have a more long lasting impact on the environment and on the county."

Jere Brittman, chair of the board of directors of the Mills River Partnership, and a former farmer and university faculty member, said Weintraub has a unique ability to bring people together.

"There has been, over the years, a history of distrust between environmentalists and the agricultural community," said Brittman, whose family has lived

up the nonprofit Center for Cultural Preservation to create documentary films.

"I am working on a film about Appalachian culture and traditions. I've been working on that in the small spaces of my life and will work on nature films, more writing, more of the artistic things that have gone by the wayside," he said.

"I pledge to continue to be a contributor to ECO. I'm not leaving because I don't love ECO and the organization and the community, I feel like I've accomplished what I set out to do."

What Weintraub — a lawyer from "up north" with an English mother and a Brooklyn accent — has accomplished is to marry all kinds of volunteers, business owners, farmers, government and community members to band together in preserving a rapidly disappearing way of life, open spaces, mountain culture and iconic natural resources.

From Brooklyn to the Blue Ridge

Weintraub's parents were teachers, so they had summers to take family vacations in New York's Adirondack Mountains.

"We spent summers catching frogs and snakes, fishing, swimming, tracking deer and

in Mills River for several generations. "Farmers and agricultural people, including myself, have been impressed with David's ability to understand problems facing our community and to be part of the solution," he said.

"He has a great sense of the historical setting of the land. He takes a great interest in understanding the history and traditions of the community. Sometimes a so-called outsider can do that better than someone who has lived here all their lives."

Brittan said the EPA recently awarded the Mills River Partnership a \$30,000 grant for its work in supporting best management practices by farmers in the valley. Hendersonville recently committed to fund the partnership with a percentage of fees from water bills.

Ashville is considering funding. "Making that connection to ecosystems, natives, natives and businesses has been the thrill of this job," Weintraub said.



Weintraub films a green sea turtle for his upcoming film, *The Call of the Ancient Mariner*.