CALLING ALL WATCHDOGS

New documentary explores our troubled waterways

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON: *Filmmaker David Weintraub, left, interviews Jim Stokely for his latest documentary, Guardians of Our Troubled Waters: River Heroes of the South. Stokely's mother, writer and environmental activist Wilma Dykeman, is prominently featured in the film. Photo courtesy of the Center for Cultural Preservation*

BY THOMAS CALDER

tcalder@mountainx.com

"In the early days of settlement one of the most heinous crimes a man could be guilty of was the littering or despoiling of another man's water supply — the spring or stream that fed him," writes Asheville native **Wilma Dykeman** in her 1955 book, *The French Broad*.

Yet over time an odd pattern developed, the author continues: "[W]hen the people began to cluster together in towns and cities and the despoiling became really large and ugly, it began to be overlooked. Villages and factories dumped their trash and turned their backs. Farther down the river people held their noses (and their tongues) and added their waste. And finally, part of the river was 'killed.'"

In the Center for Cultural Preservation's latest documentary, *Guardians of Our Troubled Waters: River Heroes of the South*, filmmaker **David Weintraub** investigates the history Dykeman describes, examining multiple waterways in Western North Carolina, East Tennessee and South Florida. Along with reviewing the country's past misuse of its rivers, tributaries and streams, the movie also highlights key figures who worked to protect these same bodies of water.

The film, however, is far from a mere float down memory lane. "To me, history doesn't have that much value unless it helps inform the present and the future," says Weintraub. Water quality, the filmmaker continues, "is one of those battles that is never won."

On Thursday, June 20, at 7 p.m., the Center for Cultural Preservation will debut *Guardians of Our Troubled Waters* at Blue Ridge Community College's Bo Thomas Auditorium. Additional screenings will take place Saturday, June 22, at The North Carolina Arboretum and Sunday, June 23, at White Horse Black Mountain. All tickets are $15.

Above all, Weintraub hopes the documentary inspires the next generation of environmental watchdogs. "The film is the story of ordinary people who made extraordinary efforts to protect what was most dear to our community, which in my mind is the natural resources around us," the filmmaker says.

SPIRITUAL SISTERS

Not surprisingly, Dykeman's legacy and environmental contributions are prominently featured in the film. But she is not the documentary's sole focus: Fellow writer **Marjory Stoneman Douglas** is also profiled. In her 1947 book, *The Everglades: River of Grass*, Stoneman Douglas warns readers of the dire situation the South Florida ecosystem faced in the wake of development.

Though their efforts were carried out in different parts of the South, Weintraub considers Stoneman Douglas and Dykeman spiritual sisters. "They were outspoken women during a time when women weren't supposed to be outspoken," the filmmaker says. "They were also both very eloquent writers and were these tremendous, eccentric hats."

Yet sadly, notes the documentarian, the influence of both women's works has diminished over time, to the point where even their regional fame is sometimes in doubt. While filming *Guardians of Our Troubled Waters*, Weintraub says most who were familiar with Stoneman Douglas' name knew it not because of her environmental writing, but rather on account of the tragic 2018 school shooting that

CONTINUES ON PAGE 26

claimed 17 lives at the Parkland, Fla., high school named in her honor.

Jim Stokely, Dykeman's son and the executive director of the Wilma Dykeman Legacy, says a similar thing is happening in Western North Carolina. With the influx of transplants relocating to the mountains, many in the region are not familiar with his mother's work. "It's one of the great injustices," he says. "She should be internationally known."

The new film will help shed greater light on both women. "They inspired people to reconnect to the things around them that were authentic and important and critical to their survival," says Weintraub. "These were two amazing leaders that were influential in their respective communities."

'UNUSUAL BEDFELLOWS'

Among their many shared interests and ideas, Dykeman and Stoneman Douglas held a common belief that true environmental change could only come about through the will and work of community members.

"Unless the people act the fires will come again," Stoneman Douglas warns in *The Everglades*. "Overdrainage will go on. The soil will shrink and burn and be wasted and destroyed, in a continuing ruin."

Dykeman strikes a similar note in *The French Broad*, in which she declares:

"In a democracy, there is no stronger regulator than the will of the people — simple people, fine people, clean or dirty people — the people. And when we realize what our apathy is costing us, we will realize it is too expensive a luxury and exchange it for enlightened self-concern and public concern. We will realize we had rather raise our own voices to cleanse our own evils than to wait until emergency has brought other pressures to bear."

TWO OF A KIND: *Champions of the waterways, writers Wilma Dykeman, left, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas were ahead of their time, says filmmaker David Weintraub. In the middle part of the 20th century, both authors debuted works addressing environmental concerns. Dykeman photo courtesy of The Wilma Dykeman Legacy Foundation; photo of Stoneman Douglas courtesy of Friends of the Everglades*

These early battle cries did not fall on deaf ears, a fact Weintraub celebrates in *Guardians of Our Troubled Waters*. Several successful grassroots efforts are featured in the film, including the work of the Upper French Broad Defense Association.

Formed in the late 1960s, the group fought over multiple years to combat the Tennessee Valley Authority's 14-dam plan, which would have covered tributaries of the French Broad River in Transylvania, Henderson, Buncombe and Madison counties.

The TVA argued the project would help eliminate flooding and pollution while creating recreational activities via the formation of new lakes. Opponents claimed the plan would displace hundreds of families, flood more than 10,000 acres of valley land and merely dilute polluted tributaries, rather than eradicate the pollutants.

At first, the defense association's struggle seemed hopeless, remembers former member and association secretary **Jere Brittain**. The TVA project garnered widespread support among local governments, he notes. Meanwhile, a majority of media outlets paid little heed to the association's early resistance. "It appeared to us then as a sort of David and Goliath type of enterprise," Brittain says.

But over time, as the association grew, so too did its message. What began as a couple dozen concerned citizens turned into an organization reaching 1,500 members.

"The interesting thing about the membership was that it cut across all sorts of demographic lines," Brittain recalls. "People who leaned Republican were in the fight because they opposed the unjustified taking of property under eminent domain laws. The more politically liberal organizations ... were in it for environmental reasons. It turned out to be some unusual bedfellows."

That odd mix, however, ultimately proved victorious in its campaign against the TVA. On Nov. 13, 1972, *The Asheville Citizen* reported that the federally owned corporation canceled its $125 million proposal due to "a decline in public support."

The broader lesson of the win is "that we're not all that far away from each other," Weintraub says, in reference to the defense association's diverse political philosophies and backgrounds. "If we look at the things we have in common, rather than the few things that separate us, we can come together and solve problems."

'THE EYES AND THE EARS'

Though *Guardians of Our Troubled Waters* explores several storylines, the documentary's main message remains the value of individual impact. "The people have to be the watchdogs," says Weintraub. "The eyes and the ears of the stream have to be the people who care about it and the people who live by it."

Stokely echoes this sentiment, emphasizing Weintraub's earlier point that the fight for clean water is never won. He encourages community members to get involved with one of the region's many nonprofits that focus on water quality, including RiverLink and Asheville GreenWorks. He also stresses the need for greater awareness among both individuals and businesses concerning their impact on our waterways.

"The French Broad has improved," Stokely says. "It's gone up a grade from nonrecreational to swimmable. However, we need to take it up a grade to drinkable."

If his mother was still alive, Stokely continues, her message would remain as it was when *The French Broad* first came out, 64 years ago: "She would say, 'Let's get on the job. Let's get to work. Let's preserve the greatest fresh watershed in the country.'"