

GREENFIELD
HILL

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Neighbors

A Watershed Moment

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Photography by Dariusz Terepka Photography



A Watershed Moment

*By Elizabeth Donnelly and this month's beautiful cover person
Photos by Dariusz Terepka, and provided by Joy Shaw*

Joy Shaw, a long-time resident at the age of 92, river buff, and protector of local land and waters, is the author and illustrator of Fairfield's enduring River-Lab program.

In 1956, Joy and Harry Shaw moved with their one-year-old daughter into the historic Perry's Mill property on the banks of Mill River in Fairfield. Their newly converted residence stood two miles upstream of Southport Harbor and was a conversion of the interior of the original mill built in the late 1630s. Harry worked as a writer and editor while Joy took in lectures about the ecology of their new environment provided by Fairfield and Westport nature centers.

In the early spring, less than a year after they had moved to the mill, Joy awoke to look out on the sight of a drained mill pond and was told by their landlord, the current Perry family owner, "Oh, I guess them eels got through that gateway, so I think I'll go ahead with that deal with the gravel company." Joy knew nothing at that point about the glacial history and gravel deposition all along southern New England. She only knew that the Perrys owned both sides of the river and had the right to do as

they chose. River protection law was over two decades away. She saw the gravel company start building a massive truck road across from the mill pond but soon went to a New York hospital to have their second child, followed by a month of recovery from a never-identified illness. So, Joy never saw the parade of trucks or machinery that took the gravel from underneath the flowering marsh upstream, dumping its topsoil into piles at the western end of the resulting excavated "lake."

Prior to 1966, the town of Fairfield had accepted as part of its open space plan the gift of six acres, three on either side of the river, near by a dog food factory that was located at the time just downstream of Sturges Road Bridge. The Garden Club of Fairfield hired a Newtown soil engineer, David Thompson, to design a plan for wildlife and plants. His plan called for "thinning" the trees on the east bank. The Garden Club did not know that the town engineering department had a plan calling for removing all trees along the river. This was due to jam-ups from trees falling into the river during floods, causing backups of river water and flooding people's riverside properties.



Joy's beloved artwork, purchased in NYC in the 1950s, trees growing from a woman's body, she calls Ophelia, an unknown sign of her life to come she says!

On May 20, 1966, Joy returned from giving a talk in Darien to find the formerly forested east bank almost entirely cleared, with displaced nesting birds screaming. Joy quickly parked and raced down the bank to confront the backhoe operator. When he insisted upon his orders, Joy stood in front of his machinery until he gave up and left. This event was the catalyst for founding the Mill River Wetland Committee, as Joy called on neighbors and conservationists to address activities concerning the river floodplain area.

At the first meeting of the Mill River Wetland Committee, Joy convinced concerned neighbors that the nature conservancy would be a better steward of the Mill River open space than the town of Fairfield. So, they encouraged her to get in touch with the local office. As advised by their director, Joy set up a study to compile a full picture of the Mill River ecology and the river's role in the town's development. About halfway through this task, the town bought the entire Perry's Mill River property available for open space.

Derailed from her original purpose, Joy pursued a plan to involve the Fairfield population in learning about the river and especially the importance of its floodplain. A Vassar graduate, she studied English and art in college. But when Joy thought about the importance of the mission, she considered the understanding of watersheds vital to the student curriculum. "We all live in a watershed system. You are always in a river

basin, also called a watershed, when you are traveling over the terrestrial earth... I think it should be a part of basic education, and that's what I was trying to do, to give them a program that would make that possible."

So, in the spring of 1967, she broke out a trail and wrote up a draft river "study trip," which she presented to Vincent Antezzo, the principal of Mill Hill School. He arranged for Joy's son's grade four teacher, Betty Modrall, to follow Joy on a demo tour of the trail. Mrs. Modrall reported positively, and the River-Lab program was set to begin in the fall of 1967. Joy recruited wildflower enthusiasts from Sasqua and Fairfield garden clubs to train as the first guides, leading the classes through the trail points, initially designed for grades kindergarten through sixth.

"They welcomed me in a way I don't think I would have been welcomed in another community." Joy attributes this warm reception to the program meeting two needs; the first was a way for parents to be involved in their children's education, as many went on to train as guides, and the second was that River-Lab met the town's need for use of open space.

The pilot launched in the fall of 1967 under the auspices of the Mill River Wetland Committee, which still shepherds the program today. It was so successful that in 1968, the Board of Education voted to make the program available across the

entire school system. For more than fifteen years, Joy wrote and illustrated the classroom materials and trained guides at the Mill while study trips took place in the open space on the river. Despite the challenges of maintaining the program, Joy was inspired to persevere in order to share "the importance of understanding the basic watershed structure of our environment."

During this time, the Mill River Wetland study group grew its base, welcoming hundreds of volunteers, trainers, and guides. Mill River Wetland Committee's fundraising, membership dues, and grants help to subsidize the program, which has evolved to meet the latest local and national science standards. Joy's work is still reflected in today's mission of the organization: to educate the community about the value of watersheds, to advocate for their continued protection, and to engage all people in the fight to protect our environment.

Over fifty years later, the award-winning River-Lab Program continues to supplement Fairfield's science curriculum and serve so many students annually. Second- through seventh-grade children receive a hands-on, inquiry-based learning experience ranging from biodiversity and erosion to groundwater and connections to the Mill River or Ash Creek estuary. Using research and fieldwork, students can take what they learn about the river basin system all over the globe and apply it to their personal experiences here in Fairfield. Perhaps most fitting to Joy's mission is the inclusion of how we can live in harmony with nature, creating a new generation of environmental stewards to protect our precious resources.

We hope you enjoyed this special story in honor of Earth Day. We are looking for more wonderful and uplifting stories like Joy's so please reach out with yours. We thank Joy for sharing her beautiful story with us!



Fulfilling Joy's Vision: Mill River Wetland Committee (MRWC) / River-Lab

By Samantha Anderson, MRWC Educate Director

Throughout the decades, our award-winning River-Lab Program has stood firm in its commitment to hands-on, inquiry-based science and environmental education. By evolving to meet the latest local and national science standards while fostering a sense of wonder and curiosity, River-Lab continues to engage students and community members with field-based experiences at the Mill River, Ash Creek Estuary, and nearby open spaces. In the 2023-24 school year, our program will reach over 3,300 students in the Fairfield area through study trips and classroom labs.

We also run community programs at local open spaces so everyone can learn about the watershed and the amazing ecosystems it supports. Check out <http://www.mrwc-fairfield.org/> for upcoming dates and information about our Walk & Talks at Mill Hollow Park and Ash Creek Estuary.