



Down by the River, a Lawyer Cleans Up

by Gordon Hickey

Jim Lang was hired to do one thing — get about thirty rusting and rotting ships and boats out of an Elizabeth River cove where they were blocking his client’s access to his property.

After some legal wrangling and judicious application of the federal government’s Clean Water Act, he was successful. The case was settled and the detritus was shipped out.

Yet, “We felt like the job wasn’t complete,” Lang said in a recent interview. The waterway was now open, but the shoreline opposite his client’s property was a mess.

Lang may have been hired to do that one thing — clean out the ships. But then Lang, like many other lawyers, did one more thing. He went beyond his client’s expectations and organized a concerted community service project that will likely pay dividends for years to come. Last August, along with about fifty volunteers,



Left: Deteriorating boats and other equipment clog an Elizabeth River cove in front of Riverside Memorial Park in Norfolk. Photo credit: The Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

Above: Jim Lang addresses volunteers as they begin cleaning up the shoreline. Photo credit: Rubin Communications.

Lang cleaned up that mess along the opposite shore, and jumpstarted a plan for a total restoration of this part of the riverfront.

Lang, who has a history of community involvement, decided it was not enough to simply get the ships out of the waterway. He began organizing volunteers. He started with the members of his own firm, Pender and Coward, PC, where he found more than a half dozen volunteers. He then asked for help from the environmental consultants who helped in the lawsuit, Kerr Environmental Services. “I’m going to be down there with attorneys in the mud pulling trash out of the water,” he told them. “You should come join us.”

He called on the Bridgetrust Title Group, who were part of the lawsuit, and they helped. Valbridge Property Advisors helped. Then Lang asked the Boy Scouts — where he had long been a volunteer — and Boy Scout Troop 1 from Trinity Presbyterian Church helped. Carmelo Gomez, his client in the lawsuit, came up from his home in Florida to help. Gomez’s son and daughter-in-law also arrived from their home in New York to

help. Volunteers from the Norfolk Wetlands Board and at least one staffer from the City of Norfolk also helped.

Why did Lang do it?

“We attorneys have an obligation to give back to our community.”

The shoreline lies along the city-owned Riverside Memorial Park in Compostella Heights, an area where 35 percent of the residents are below the poverty line. “These are people who don’t have the ability to get the attention of their government,” he said. If someone had clogged up the waterway in another more affluent part of the city the residents “would know who to call and you

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Volunteers pose for a picture in August, 2016, before beginning their clean-up of the Elizabeth River cove shoreline. Photo credit: Rubin Communications.

would have government down there making sure that it was taken care of.” The people of Compostella Heights don’t have that kind of clout.

“We attorneys have an obligation to give back to our community,” Lang said. “For years I’ve devoted a lot of time to community service and other organizations. During this time in my life, I had some time to take this one on.”

So, on a Saturday in August, the fifty volunteers that Lang had gathered cleaned up 600 feet of Elizabeth River shoreline. They pulled out metal, ropes “as thick as your ankles,” tires, oil cans. They filled a twenty-cubic-yard trash container with junk and had it hauled away.

About two weeks later the volunteers came back along with members of the Elizabeth River Project to install a test planting along a stretch of the mudflat. Pamela Boatwright, a deputy director of the organization, said that a larger stretch of the shoreline will have to be built-up and filled in before the marsh grasses can be planted there. That’s a step for down the road, after the group determines how well the test planting does. In the end, it will be returned to a living shoreline with a natural ecosystem protecting the shore from erosion.

Boatwright has high praise for Lang. “He’s the one who orchestrated it all,” she said. “He put all the partners together, coordinated the date, did it all.”

Her group wasn’t involved at all in the legal battle over the river. But it was the settlement of that dispute that brought Lang into the environmental cleanup project. “In most cases like this, I would imagine (the lawyers) would have just gotten the vessels out and gone away. Jim took it to that next level, where he saw they did some damage, so let’s try to repair it,” she said. “That’s very astounding and very cool.”

“He knew how to rally all the partners around him. You know, many hands make light work.”

Lang, whose practice focuses on environmental law, hopes to see a living shoreline there in the future. “It helps eliminate blight in the community and protects the waterway from pollution.”

“If we didn’t go down there and clean up that shoreline, it wasn’t going to happen.”