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Teresa Young & Sterling Sadler**

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Photo by Steve Roos

*Teresa Young, Joe Ross, Henry Swink,
Sterling Sadler & Joe Eason*

Sustainability Serves as a Foundation in Florence County's Lynches River Park

BY DAN MCCUE

The Environmental Discovery Center at Lynches River County Park in Florence County has been described in a number of ways since it opened its doors during the winter of 2008.

For some, it's a reminder of childhoods long past, a look back to an era when hours not spent in school meant being in the woods, on the ball field or just simply outside.

Others describe it as a wonderful opportunity for hands-on learning in a unique and inspiring environment.

And then of course, there's the fact that the center is soon to be designated one of few LEED certified buildings in the state, and the only one to garner the highly recognized status in the county.

In the end, however, Joe Eason, director of Florence County Parks and Recreation, says the center is all those things and perhaps one more: evidence that when Sterling Sadler sets her mind to something she will not be denied.

"To be honest with you, there were a lot of times during this project when my spirits flagged," Eason said. "But Sterling, the chairwoman of the committee that brought (the building) to fruition never wavered. She always kept us focused on the end product."

Imaginations fired by outdoor inspiration

In an era when municipal projects and even the best-intentioned dreams routinely fall prey to budget constraints and plain old pessimism, the Environmental Discovery Center is certainly a marked contrast to its times on a number of levels.

To begin with, there's the century-old wood that comprise its walls and siding, donations harvested from a half-dozen old tobacco barns in the region. Then there are the floors, which have been fashioned from the interior of a pack house where farm animals once feasted and agricultural products were stored.

But at its heart, it is the programs that make the center an invaluable addition to education in the state. At a time when constant pressure is asserted in favor of computers, technology and the Internet, it is a building where programs and displays remind visitors to take their time, slow down, look, and listen.

"I have got nothing against technology, in fact, I think it's wonderful," Sadler said, after chuckling over Eason's assessment

of her tenacity in regard to the project. "But at the same time, I remember what it was like to grow up not too long ago and have your imagination fired by all that was around you. I grew up on a farm, which had horses, and it wasn't a rare thing for us to play cowboys and Indians one day, and then to be pretending to be pirates down by the swamp the next. It's by being outside, and immersed in nature, that your imagination really grows; I truly believe that it's nature that awakens us to the possibilities of what we want to be and what we can be."

Lynches River County Park is located in Coward, a small town on Highway 52 in Florence County. The park has long featured a community center, fishing, canoeing, nature trails, cabin rentals, and picnicking. The center itself, which opened in February 2008, is just under 3,000 square-feet and has already played host to about 20,000 visitors, Eason said. Ongoing projects around its perimeter include a 75-foot extension of the "canopy" walkway leading away from the building — a doubling of its current length, and the installation of native plant material that will eventually nestle the building in a very appropriate, Southern forest setting.

The building itself houses lecture space, a growing library, and a "situation" room where visitors can bring in their "finds" — an arrow head, for instance, and trade it for something of equal value, a turtle shell perhaps.

"We want this center to be a very hands-on, interactive facility," Eason said.

At the same time, other displays seek to tell the story of place, revealing the Lynches River's central place in local religious practice and the many baptisms performed in its waters.

While displays are always changing, part of Eason's goal is never having it be a "static" museum. There are certain permanent pieces, such as the electronic equipment that monitors weather both at ground level and at different elevations around the park; there's also equipment used to capture wildlife images from night vision cameras posted outside. Not surprisingly, clips of raccoons, possums and deer dominate.

Eason said securing LEED certification also has been a goal of the facility's backers, almost from the moment they came up with the idea to create it.

"In a sense, it was a no-brainer," Eason said. "After all, if we were determined to have a facility that would be all about promoting the environment, it only made sense to lead by example. From the concept through construction, everyone involved was convinced that the exterior and as much of the interior as possible should be made from reclaimed materials, and that the center should be positioned in such a way so that it best captures and utilizes natural light."

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System is a third-party certification program intended to encourage the adoption of sustainable green building and development practices.

Among the things it looks at are how a structure functions and its impact on human and environmental health: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality.

Finding members of the local agricultural community who were willing to donate the remnants of old tobacco barns proved to be the easy part of securing raw material for the center; harvesting it and then fitting the pieces back together at the county park was another matter.

"One of the challenges in using reclaimed material — especially very old material — is that in the old days they didn't rely on precision cutting," Eason said. "When these barns went up, the people that built them didn't worry so much about variations in the width or thickness of the planks, and such. In a sense it was like taking apart a puzzle and putting it back together again."

He said that workers had to be particularly careful to not break any of the pieces — a challenge when some of them are as much as 16-feet long. "And of course, the floor was an entirely different challenge, due not only to its age, but also to its being of tongue and groove design," he said.

Beyond working with the material, there was also the challenge of actually estimating how much material would be needed to raise the two-story structure.

Rather sheepishly, Eason admitted that the staff and planning committee "didn't understand the magnitude of the project when we undertook it," but he quickly added that when more wood was needed, businesses in the local agricultural community were happy to provide it.

"We harvested a lot of lumber, most of it old cedar and in very fine form," Eason said.

Revealing natural resources

Teresa Young, the center's supervisor and a former staffer of the Children's Museum in Myrtle Beach, has a succinct way for summing up the facility's mission.

"We're looking to develop and reveal the natural resources of the park," she said. "We want to highlight the natural resources of the Pee Dee."

At the same time, Young said she's also got a hardcore educational mission, a mission that must constantly be tailored according to the audience that's before her. For young public school children, for instance, Young provides programs that adhere to and carefully track state science education standards. For others, like the group of home-schooled children

of varying ages that recently visited the center, she's does a little broader program, emphasizing the benefits of conservation.

Other activities include live animal presentations — currently the center is home to a snake and a turtle — and guided nature walks.

"One of the beauties of this facility, and of what Teresa does, is how it and its programs have been designed to accommodate any group," Eason said.

Of the venue for her presentation, Young was similarly unreserved.

"This building is a fabulous opportunity to extend the message of conservation into the community," she said. "It is an example of taking the concepts of conservation and applying them and I think it imparts a sense of what they can do in their own lives."

Young added that the building also illustrates the point that old really

can become new again.

"So much demolition occurs where old buildings are destroyed and the material hauled away. What we're saying with this building is just because something is old doesn't mean its lost importance or viability," she said.

Young, who holds an undergraduate degree in biology and recently received a master's in education, took her job with the park



before the center was actually open, and it was at her insistence that some actual animals — namely the snake and turtle — were incorporated into the center.

“It was a little bit of a challenge because live animal presentations weren’t part of the original plan, but coming in when I did, I saw a real opportunity to tailor some of the programs to things I was passionate about, one of them being herpetology,” she said. “I think it is important to explain to young school children the difference between venomous and non-venomous snakes, to do away with myth, and to explain that every living thing has a job to do.”

Seeing the path from dream to reality

In all, it took four years to bring the center to fruition, which is not bad at all,” Sadler quickly pointed out.

“Many projects fish and flounder for funding, and then over the prolonged period it takes to get anything done, people lose enthusiasm and they don’t get done,” she said.

“I was determined that wouldn’t happen in this case,” Sadler added.

For Sadler, who had helped forge a cost-share relationship with the state to get the Riverwalk built in the park, said having a center to take people to and from the walk simply made sense.

After the committee decided the how, the when and the why of building it, the riddle Sadler had to solve was how to pay for it.

Eason said when bids were opened for the Environmental Discovery Center project; the lowest bid was \$1 million. The problem was the parks and recreation department only had about half that amount to devote to the project.

Sadler’s solution was to pull together funding from state, local and private sources, most of it in the form of grants. Mostly, she said, she simply kept the faith.

“My husband says I’m the kind of person who not only can envision a project completed, but also can see a path toward it,” Sadler said. “I think one reason that’s so is because I understand that when it comes to public/private partnerships, the participants come from different types of environments and mindsets.”

Sadler said that when it concerned county employees who worked on the project, she understood that the difference between what they had and what the final cost would be was something that weighed on their minds. “However, I and others on the committee also realized that we weren’t operating under the same restrictions as they were,” she said. “So we got out and did some exploring — including visiting other science centers, which provided us with a clearer vision of what we wanted to do and how to achieve it.”

Like others involved in the project, Sadler described LEED certification as a critically important component of that vision.

“This building had to be an example of why conservation is important in and of itself. If we could not set an example, I think many of us would have seen the effort as being somewhat diminished. We wanted the center itself to be the message. A message about sustainability, about nature, about the philosophy of green,” Sadler said. “I don’t think we would’ve been very good stewards of the environment if we hadn’t proceeded in that way.”

