

River Quest...from Lunch to Launch, the Nuts & Bolts

It was **John Goldfine** (part of the Duluth family that for decades owned/operated the *Vista Fleet* here in the Twin Ports and the *Southern Belle* Riverboat in Chattanooga, Tenn.) who initiated a pivotal conversation in 1993, recalls **Kurt Soderberg**, who at the time, was executive director of the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District.

“John called me on the spur of the moment to go to lunch. We talked about the St. Louis River, the efforts we were taking to clean it up, and a unique educational program that the Goldfines had initiated in Chattanooga to get people there reconnected to the Tennessee River. He strongly suggested that WLSSD take the lead and work with others interested in the preservation of the St. Louis River to get *kids* out to see how important the river was to this region. So, it was John who gave the waterfront community the germ of an incredible idea and left the rest of us to run with it.”

Nearly 20 waterfront-related industries jumped at the chance to run with it – including the Duluth Seaway Port Authority – to create and sponsor what would become the first annual *St. Louis River Quest* in May 1993. **Ray Skelton** helped shepherd the program through the years in his role as Port Authority special projects/environmental and government relations director until his death in 2006.

Almost 800 sixth-graders from Duluth, Hermantown, Proctor and Superior participated in the inaugural excursions onboard the two Vista Fleet boats. The purpose as described that first year remains much the same today: *to help young people become more environmentally conscious ...to increase their awareness of industrial and recreational impacts on the environment – and realize that thoughtful partnerships between industry, government and the public can result in safe use of our natural resources.*

“For WLSSD, River Quest gave us the opportunity to focus an educational program on the most important cleanup – the dramatic improvement in water quality in the St. Louis River – as a result of the treatment plant construction,” noted Soderberg. “River Quest tours gave us the chance to show the science behind cleaning up contamination and keeping the river clean for future generations.”

Deb (Rapp) Saunders served as WLSSD’s representative on the River Quest planning committee for its first five years. “It was so exciting to help create this very interactive, hands-on initiative,” recounted Saunders recently. “The kids loved the learning stations. And committee members were just as excited to see who came up with different activities each year. Our message then was ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ so we created a groundwater model through which students could see a cross-section of colored liquids that would seep through the ground and end up in Lake Superior if thrown in the trash or down the sink rather than recycled.”

What Saunders recalled most fondly, however, were the people – the other volunteers with whom she served. “Working with founding members like Ray Skelton from the Port Authority and Jerry Fryberger from Hallett Dock Company was a delight,” added Saunders. “Both stand out in my heart; they were the nuts and bolts of River Quest.”

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When contacted recently, one of those “nuts and bolts,” **Jerry Fryberger**, reminisced about his company’s ongoing commitment to River Quest and his years of service as its volunteer treasurer. “Duluth-Superior harbor had a great story to tell about the commercial shipping industry – that millions of tons of coal, iron ore, limestone, grain and other commodities moved in and out of this port each year. We wanted students to know where those items were coming from and where they were headed, why the 1,000-foot ore carriers could not go through the St. Lawrence Seaway, and how the Soo Locks worked. Hallett felt that being part of this maritime community, we had a responsibility to participate in telling that story with an exhibit...and by financing the program, which continues to this day. As River Quest treasurer for nearly 15 years, I had great support from the maritime community as well as other businesses such as Minnesota Power, WP&RS Mars, and DM&IR Railway, to name just a few.”

The waterfront community lost River Quest champion **Ray Skelton** in 2006, but his memory lives on in what has now become an annual *Captain Ray Skelton River Quest Essay Contest*. Begun in 2008, student essays highlight lessons learned during their River Quest experience. In addition to winning cool prizes, the winner’s name is added to a traveling plaque which remains on display at his/her school for a full year following the presentation.

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For more information about River Quest, www.seagrant.umn.edu/riverquest

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