

I've been in the Foundation business since 1997. Going on 17 years this summer. And I've learned that when people ask me what I do.....if I don't have time to really explain our work....I give them my short answer, which is simply....I help people give away money to improve our community.....But the truth of the matter is that when we're doing what's really important.....when we find that sweet spot, that perfect place and time when we're really making a difference for the good of our community,.....it's never about the money.

In this line of work I've found that great things never start with money.....they start with an idea....a vision....a passion....a desire to change the status quo.....a desire to leave a mark.....to make a difference...

And so we are gathered here today along the majestic blue waters of the mighty St. Clair River....to celebrate the results of a vision....of a desire to make a difference....And whether you believe these natural assets are a gift from God, or mother nature, or the Big Bang.....we are here because a single person, Dr. James C. Acheson, decided he could make a difference.

We are here to celebrate and launch the next lifecycle of this shoreline and this beautiful stretch of river. And while I know we have people here today who may view this as a habitat restoration project,....or a clean-up project....it is so much more than that.

What we are really doing is just allowing this precious gem to continue to serve and enhance the economic prosperity of our region. The site we are standing on today has been serving mankind since the first Native Peoples' lived and thrived here hundreds of years ago.

This river.....this land.....has served the needs of men, women and children since the first human saw her beauty. For hundreds of years she has served us without complaint. Beginning in the late 1800's and continuing on for more than 100 years she sacrificed almost everything to sustain America's industrial growth.

But by the late 1990's she was tired and worn. After more than a century of bearing the burden of America's industrial revolution,....she bore the scars of labor.....She showed the wounds of the timber industry, of shipping, of railroad, and of our selfish economic prosperity...every tree, every bush, every native plant had been stripped away.....Fish and wildlife struggled to survive here. As the dawn of the 21st Century drew closer she was left abandoned, abused and neglected.....not a single tree stood standing on her once proud shores to provide shade and shelter.

Yet she did not complain. She simply waited....waited for the power and will of a single man to light a spark.....waited for the boy who grew up on the south side of Port Huron.....waited until Jim Acheson made a decision whose impact he surely couldn't have imagined or predicted.

And make no mistake,.... money certainly does play a major role. It makes a lot of things possible. In the early part of this century Dr. Acheson spent millions of dollars to purchase the land you sit or stand on today. Millions to clear away the remnants of the railroads and scrap yards and cement plants.

But in 2009 he had his team at Acheson Ventures approach the Community Foundation with a daunting proposal.... He asked us to consider taking over the care and restoration of almost one mile of shoreline. His team had come to the point when they knew that money alone would not rally the public and private sectors to finish this restoration. He offered to donate the entire shoreline to the Community Foundation.

When the Board of the Community Foundation finally agreed to accept the gift, we had no real money to start work. We hadn't yet asked any donors for help. We hadn't approached any state or federal agency for support. We literally didn't have a single dollar set aside for this project. But we had something more important than money....something more valuable.....we had hope and desire.....and passion....We believed in a vision. We believed in the power of the human spirit....and we found new friends.....

Our first federal partner was the US Fish & Wildlife Service who gave us \$250,000 for our Pilot Phase. Then we went to NOAA and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. And we told NOAA we needed another \$2.1 million to finish the restoration component. NOAA said “NO””our first rejection.....We can’t give you \$2.1 million they said.....but we can give you \$2 million.”

Then MDOT offered us a challenge grant to build our trail and our first corporate partner, Michigan Mutual, came on board, then Dr. Nasr, and the Kusch’s, and the Samman’s, then more donors....big and small.....joined in until we had enough to build the trail.

Then our St. Clair County Parks & Recreation Commission said they would join us and take the lead in building a brand-new County Wetlands Park on the southern end of our property. Then DTE said we’ll help you remove those old utility poles.

And at some point down the road we knew we wanted to restore and re-open this beautiful old railroad ferry dock...but we didn’t have any money.....then Catherine Houghton....and Mino Duffy Kramer...and Robert & Linda Smith...and Clinton & Barbara Stimpson.....and other donors came to us and said “let’s not wait...let’s do it now.”

We knew we wanted permanent pieces of public art along our shoreline, and our donors and our Blue Water Arts Committee said..... let’s not wait.....and then something magical happened....

.....the mighty St. Clair River smiled....and this majestic stretch of shoreline re-awakened.....

We are here to give thanks to the majestic blue waters of the mighty St. Clair River. We are here to thank her for centuries of service dedicated to the prosperity of mankind..... We are here to return a long overdue favor....

We are here to celebrate the power of the human spirit,.... of belief,.... of perseverance....this treasured natural asset is now ready to continue her support of our economic growth and prosperity...but in a new way...in the Blue Economy Way.....in tourism, recreation, boating, placemaking...and quality of life.....

On behalf of the Community Foundation and all of our many donors, partners and friends, we thank you all for being a part of creating the Blue Water River Walk.

June 7, 2014
Blue Water River Walk Grand Opening
Randy Maiers