

River Action employees transfer rain barrels from a truck to storage on Thursday, April 17, in Davenport. The environmental organization received 100 plastic barrels that were previously used in Italy to hold olive oil and will be reused by selling them for the Retain the Rain program. *Katelyn Metzger*



# River Action

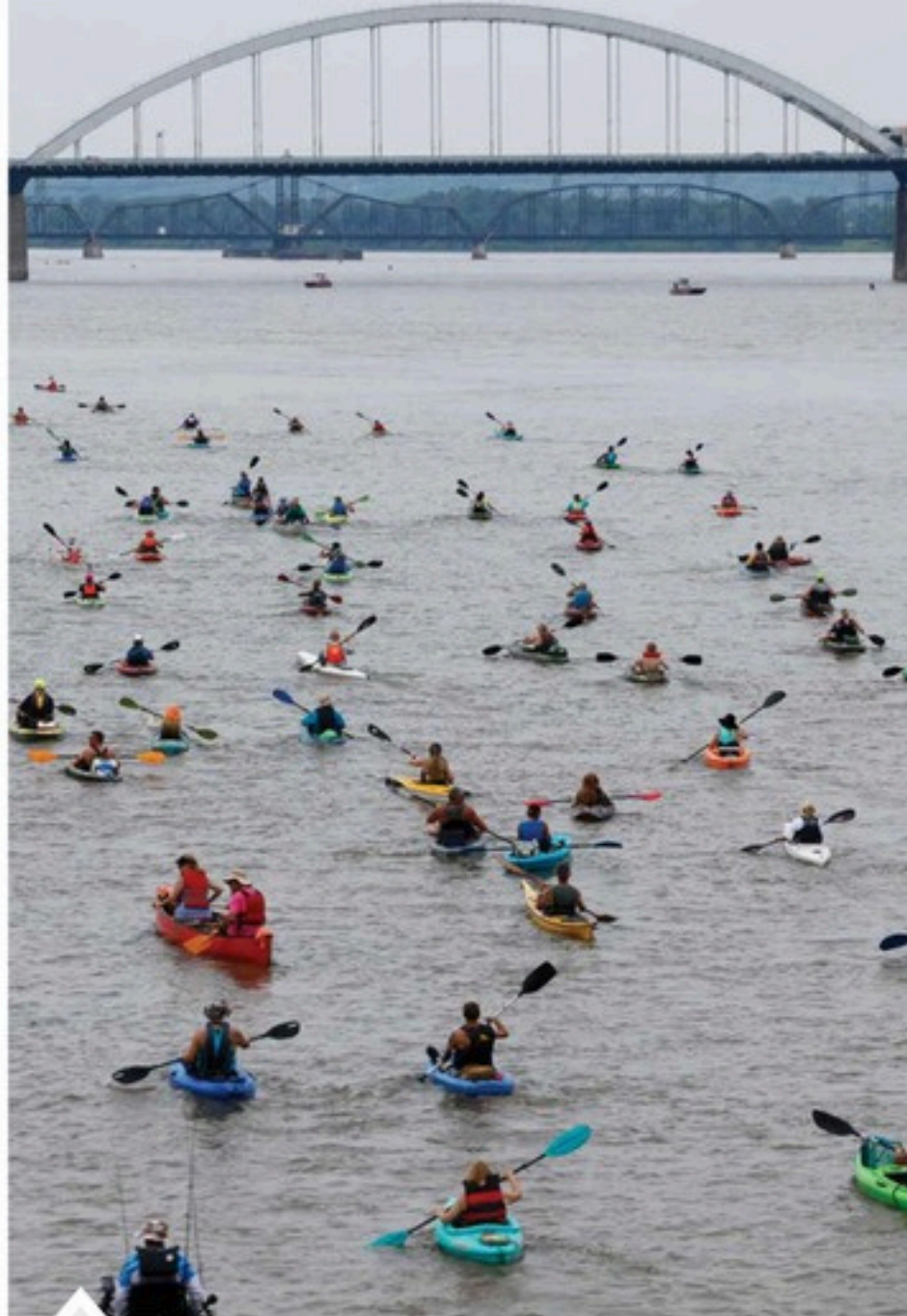
keeps the focus on  
the water through  
community  
education

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**K**athy Wine came to Davenport for a teaching job, but ended up with a much larger classroom than she ever expected.

Originally from Lake City, Iowa, Wine moved to Davenport for a teaching job, but found her true calling in environmental activism. As the executive director of River Action, Inc., Wine advocates for conservation and utilization of the Mississippi River that divides the Quad-Cities physically, but unites them communally.





Hundreds of kayakers float towards Centennial Bridge during Floatzilla on Saturday, Aug. 16, in Rock Island. *Katelyn Metzger*

"I grew up on a farm. Maybe it's because that was landlocked that when I landed here and the river was here I was like, 'Oh my gosh. I'm a goner,'" she said with a laugh.

River Action, celebrating its 41st anniversary in 2025, has its office in downtown Davenport, facing the river it represents. The organization takes on education, flood mitigation and planning and in-ground projects to name a few, she said.

"We've never lobbied in Des Moines or Springfield, but we do realize we have a voice. When we have an audience, whether it's on the education programs, whether it's our conference, which is all about the river and all the aspects of its resiliency, when we have an audience, we are advocates and we try to turn the public into advocates as well," she said. "(We want them) to become stewards and to become informed citizens that go out and vote and understand the policies."

All that advocacy work started in 1984 when three women — Wine, Paddy Blackman and Priscilla Parkhurst — banded together for a project called Year of the River. Commissioned by the Quad Cities Chamber, the goal was to help Quad-Cities businesses think about embracing the natural resource in front of them.

The trio planned 12 months of activities, which began on the Rock Island Arsenal in the Mississippi River. The community was invited onto the island where they were offered scopes to view the eagles and chili and hot chocolate to keep warm.

"Then we followed it up with tons of things during the year. At the end of the year, we decided we needed to know how well we did, and so we took over the Mel Foster Real Estate office, 34 phones, and we created a questionnaire as scientific as we knew how to do," Wine said.



Now, the Quad-Cities has 60 miles of paved riverfront bike trails. But, there's still more work to do to connect trails



"We're meant to be a catalyst. We come up with ideas and a lot of them have been through collaboration at conferences. When we hear what other cities are doing, we say, 'If they can do it, why can't we?'" – Kathy Wine

They created a survey and began calling "random numbers from the phone book." When it was all said and done, 84% of those who answered said they had done something involving the water during the Year of the River and 86% of people knew what the Year of the River event was.

"We decided we were on to something here and we should keep this going," Wine said.

The next year, in 1985, they began Ride the River, an annual Father's Day bike ride along the riverfront trails. At the time, only two miles of the Quad-Cities riverfront, the Ben Butterworth Parkway in Moline, had a defined trail.

Wine said the group knew they wouldn't be able to raise enough money with their event to build all the trails the Quad-Cities needed, but what they could do was advocate.

"The idea was now you see what you could have if we built it," she said. "All the funding that we raised was because we were three volunteers who said, 'We will put all this funding to go to the cities and to the police departments to put it on. You can have the money, we'll divide it up. You just have to earmark it for bike trails.' So that's what we did."

Wine said River Action alone was never able to pay for much of the trail, but the seed was planted. River Action members continued to advocate for the trails, emailing participants to let them know when city council meetings were being held and encouraged them to show up and let the councils know they wanted these trails.

(Right) A rain barrel in action as it collects storm water during a downpour at River Action in Davenport. The 60-gallon barrels collect water that normally would be adding runoff to the Mississippi River that can be used for watering lawns and gardens. *Katelyn Metzger*





Floatzilla kayakers float through the Mississippi River Lock and Dam No. 15 on Saturday, Aug. 16, in Rock Island. *Katelyn Metzger*

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River Action has continued its advocacy over the years by establishing new initiatives practically every year and applying for grants to help upkeep the community. Wine credits that to having an intelligent and energetic staff who supply positive ideas and hard work to get results.

A big win River Action has had over the years, she said, is the Channel Cat Water Taxi, started in 1995. The taxi has four ports in the Quad-Cities, two on the Illinois side and two on the Iowa side.

The taxi picks up guests and transports them across the river to various ports, utilizing the river as its own highway.

Wine got the idea after attending a conference in Baltimore, which had a similar concept. When she presented it to the River Action board of directors, she told them they had secured a \$25,000 grant to study if something like this would be feasible in the Quad-Cities.

"So my board member said, 'Well, we could do that. And then at the end we would have a study, and it would be on the shelf, and it would say you do have the ability to go ahead or you don't. Or, you could spend it on a boat and try it and see if it works,'" Wine said. "And if in the end it doesn't, you can sell it. If it does work, you're off and running. So we did that."

After a couple of years, the Channel Cat was handed off to MetroLINK, which provides bus service in the Illinois Quad-Cities. The Channel Cat is still running 30 years later, operating from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend, as long as weather allows.

Wine said getting the taxi started and then handing it off was best for River Action, and the community, because her organization was never meant to be a business.

"We're meant to be a catalyst. We come up with ideas and a lot of them have been through collaboration at conferences.



When we hear what other cities are doing, we say, 'If they can do it, why can't we?'" she said. "That's always been our attitude from the very beginning."

Wine said collaborations are a big part of the success story and how River Action has been able to accomplish all that it has, but big projects require big patience. Something her team excels in, Wine said, is being able to see the next step in the process and not get bogged down by the wait-and-see process.

"I guess it's more the idea that you don't get discouraged if you know what

the next step is, and we always knew what the next step was so we'd take it," she said. "That keeps you from getting into despair."

Funding is always an issue, she said, so projects have to be done in phases. A big project River Action is working on now is First Bridge, a re-creation of a single 254-foot span of the first railroad bridge to cross the Mississippi River in 1856.

The bridge would create a safe recreational trail crossing point and be a key connection to the existing riverfront bike and pedestrian trails on either side of the river, Wine said.



So far, \$1.2 million in private funding has been raised, but River Action needs public funding to continue the project and is working on going after it. The project was launched about six years ago, Wine said, but has hit various snags along the way.

The process has been slow, she said, but is still ongoing.

Another big project underway for River Action is to get every town in the Quad-Cities region registered in the Community Rating System with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. CRS gives each community a rating based on the floodplain practices in the area.

In turn, Wine said, the rating can help bring down flood insurance costs for residents. The only trick is getting the town enrolled in the program.

"In the process, we found out three of the entities in the Quad-Cities were in the system: Davenport, Moline and Rock Island County," she said. "(But) we have 13 communities that aren't, so we went to getting an intern with the sole duty of getting trained at FEMA and CRS."

Gianna Zampogna is a senior at Augustana College in Rock Island and the intern for River Action, Inc. In her role, she said, she has been meeting with various city officials to put together the needed documents — the CRS manual is 600 pages alone, she said — to help the cities submit to FEMA for credit.

"We look at criteria like what we need to present to FEMA and we comb through the documents," Zampogna said. "Whether that's me looking through public records or reaching out to the city administrator to look at permit records ... it's a lot of collaboration with city officials to make a good application to present to FEMA, making sure we're getting all of the credit that we can get, and hopefully getting a larger reduction on flood insurance."

Work for the community is central to River Action's mission, but so is community involvement. Activities along the riverfront are integral to that, Wine said, with a popular one being the senior golf cart tour.

"Our senior golf cart tour gets about 1,000 seniors out every year that aren't generally walking or biking the bike trails, but we have them on the trails with speakers that are professionals, or public officials," she said.

The speakers explain the local landmarks and how money was spent to create what they are seeing. Wine said it's a win-win for everyone: River Action gets people outside and enjoying the natural resources and attendees get to leave as informed citizens.

"That's another way of education is getting people engaged," she said.

River Action puts out a quarterly publication, "eddy Magazine," and an extensive email list that keeps the public informed. It's a task Wine takes seriously and is passionate about, even 41 years in to heading up the organization. It's what keeps her motivated to keep going and advocating for the river, she said.

"I always had a vision on what the river could be, and what the Quad-Cities could be if we were more inclined to have good design, good policies if we ever had setbacks due to flooding, good programs and events on the river where everybody is celebrating it," she said. "Those are things that keep you going. If you can just imagine what it would be like, and again, if you know what the next step might be, you can keep yourself motivated."

In 2025, River Action started its next step with the Getting Back to Our Roots campaign, a prairie planting initiative designed to reintroduce native prairie plants that once made up the vast majority of the Iowa and Illinois landscapes, said programs manager James Lasher.

"Today, there's less than 0.01% of the original prairie that existed here, so we



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wanted to reintroduce that aspect of our local pride here in the Quad-Cities and invest in our relationship with that ecosystem that defines this Iowa, Illinois area," he said.

Lasher said River Action provided native prairie seeds to 15 different parks and preserves in the greater Quad-Cities region. In total, more than 32 acres of prairie were planted in those 15 parks thanks to the initiative.

It's differences like those that add up overtime, Wine said, and that have kept her motivated 41 years in. When she came to the Quad-Cities, her goal was to teach English.

She ended up teaching a much different audience on a much different topic.

But, she kept education at the forefront. And River Action has decades of success to prove it.

"I'm a theater/speech teacher, so I always feel like the show must go on," she said. "I certainly have had that mindset and in creating theater, you're making something out of nothing a lot of times. I feel like we do that here, too."

**"Today, there's less than 0.01% of the original prairie that existed here, so we wanted to reintroduce that aspect of our local pride here in the Quad-Cities." — James Lasher**