

EARTH DAY

Environment offers new kind of green

The chance to make a lasting difference lures established professionals

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As a 13-year-old Boy Scout, helping shut down pollutants illegally dumped in a stream led Rick Gaskins to a career in environmental law in Charlotte.

But it took a horrific car crash, three decades later, to steer Gaskins to the job he really wanted: executive director of the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation.

This Earth Day finds many such career shifts among the leaders of Charlotte's environmental and conservation groups. As the groups mature, they're luring established professionals -- lawyers, bankers, business owners -- to a different kind of green.

The career-changers say they like the chance to make lasting differences. They bring sharp skills, fresh perspectives and credentials that landowners, government agencies and foundations respect.

Gaskins' trajectory: Duke University mechanical engineering degree; Harvard law degree, cum laude; 23-year career that earned him recognition as one of the top lawyers in his field.

Then the crash, three years ago, during a business trip in Colorado. An oncoming SUV crossed the center line. With both vehicles traveling at 70 mph, his tiny, rental Dodge Neon was crushed.

"I'm the titanium man," Gaskins, 49, wryly joked about the surgeries that put him back together. It would be a year before he could return to work.

He had always wanted to advocate for a nonprofit group. "When something like (the accident) happens, it forces you to slow down enough to think about it," he said, "and to do something about it."

Gaskins had experience in community service, including advisory leadership of the Salvation Army in Charlotte. He believed that the problem-solving skills he honed as an engineer and lawyer could help solve thorny environmental problems.

But he worried about the leap from a busy law practice, representing lenders, developers and industries, to a job that pays \$30,000 a year.

His family, which includes five children, embraced the idea. Fellow environmental lawyers called to offer their services to the foundation. Gaskins went to work for the group March 1.

He looked happy a few days ago, standing by Lake Wylie in jeans after his first news conference defending the Catawba.

"I feel fortunate to be able to have this kind of job," he said, "and that's the beauty of it."



DIEDRA LAIRD / Staff Photo

Portrait of Rick Gaskins, new executive director of the Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation, by the lake.

For a story on Charlotte environmental groups hiring former attorneys, bankers and MBAs to run the increasingly sophisticated groups. Gaskins is a former Charlotte attorney.

Sense of reward

That sense of reward is common among green professionals, said Reid Wilson of the Conservation Trust of North Carolina, a statewide group that works with the 25 local land trusts.

Wilson himself was once chief of staff of the Environmental Protection Agency.

"EPA had 18,000 employees and we have 13," he said. "But the job is very rewarding because we do accomplish tangible, lasting land protection that will protect drinking water and forests forever."

After her recent marriage and 23 years at Bank of America making and managing private equity investments, Ann Hayes Browning decided it was time for new challenges.

"Doing something closer to home," she said. "Doing something for my community."

As project director of the fledgling Carolina Thread Trail, she has traded air travel for the Subaru she drives through 15 Charlotte-area counties. The Thread Trail, under the lead of the Catawba Lands Conservancy, will be a regional network of trails and greenways that links communities and attractions.

Browning found similarities between launching the project she joined in 2006 and researching investments -- she works just as hard, for one. But a revelation was learning how unique each community is, and how welcoming.

"People are really good," she said, "at saying, 'Thank you.' "

Charlotte real estate lawyer Saxby Chaplin had always hoped he could someday work for the good of his community -- maybe by his 60s. But when the Trust for Public Land offered him a job at 54, deciding to leave a prestigious firm "really took some soul searching."

Seven years later, as the Trust's state counsel for the Carolinas, Chaplin has learned to print his own letters and put toner in the office copier. He has also weathered the financial storms that batter nonprofits.

On balance, he said, his job satisfaction has been worth the risk.

"One of the things I really enjoy is working with and meeting so many people who care about the environment and want to conserve it," he said.

And it's nice to help make that happen, he said.

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