



PRIDE PARADE, DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH. PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN COHEN

## ●●● Features



TOM BAXTER

### Those Trail-blazing Friends of the Riverfront

JOANN CANTRELL  
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The best type of friend is one who has your best interests at heart. To live in Pittsburgh is to live in a place where there's a group of friends who have been ahead of the curve in developing the greatest natural resource that defines our city--the riverfront. As the properties along the water have shifted from abandoned industrial dumps to recreational amenities, an unseen cultural shift has also taken place, allowing Pittsburghers to reconnect with the rivers and see the city in new ways that provide opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

Pittsburgh's [Friends of the Riverfront](#), a membership-based nonprofit has pioneered the effort to protect and restore the region's rivers by concentrating on riverfront stewardship, expansion and the maintenance of the trail system. Executive Director, Tom Baxter, came on as a consultant for the Friends of the Riverfront to help see the board through their strategic plan based on core principles and a focused mission. He became so passionate about the group, that when he finished consulting four years ago, he decided to stay on and oversee the FOR with its new goals and objectives.

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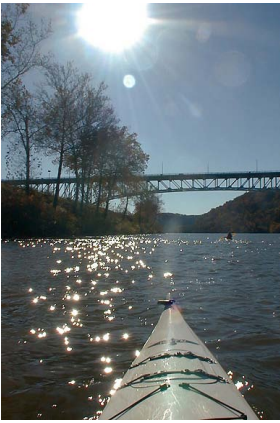
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From his office in the River Walk Corporate Center in the South Side's Terminal Building, Baxter explained the FOR's mission to increase awareness with the Pittsburgh region's rivers. Originally led by a small group that included Tom Murphy, Edward Muller, John Stephen, R. Todd Erkel and Martin O'Malley, the Friends of the Riverfront emerged in the early 1990s from an opportunity to reclaim much of the city's riverfront for public access and recreational use. The group championed a vision to transform the public's access to 35 miles of the waterfront as a multi-use public space, pushing forward with river cleanup and plantings. By 1993, the organization moved toward widespread credibility when it secured transportation enhancement funds for the [Three Rivers Heritage Trail](#). When Tom Murphy was elected Mayor in November 1993, he quickly made riverfront access and recreational trails a priority. Now nearly 20 years old, Friends of the Riverfront set an early example of ground-up activism.

"Our vision now is more about the region - beyond the city," explained Baxter. "Now that the trails within the city have been complete, we're working on 90 plus municipalities in Allegheny County that are down the Ohio and up the Allegheny. We're now working with Allegheny County to bring the success we've seen in the city to other riverfront municipalities."

If there is one perception that board member Judy Melvin could clarify about the FOR, it would be on how the trails came into being.

"People think the trails just existed or that the city was responsible for placing them. The community is unaware of what it takes to create and maintain a trail. Tom and the staff work very hard with the legal, financial, easement, maintenance and a whole host of issues that are behind the creation of the trails. Friends of the Riverfront and the Three Rivers Heritage Trail are one in the same."

A biker for the last 10 years, Melvin lives in the area of Mexican War Streets on the North Side and uses the trails every chance she gets.

"Our trails are active throughout the year and used by runners, bikers, walkers and cross country skiers. You can experience so many uniquely different things within a few miles along the way. Within a few miles you can pass the stadiums, the Carnegie Science Center, the Rivers Casino and see everything from ducks on the river to people crewing, all along the city's beautiful skyline."

Along with the Three Rivers Heritage Trail, FOR created the Three Rivers Water Trail System for those who boat, kayak or canoe. The water trail began with the Allegheny River and has now expanded to include the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers.

And it's not too early to begin training for FOR's signature event, the 13th annual [Pittsburgh Triathlon and Adventure Race](#) set for Sunday, August 1, 2010 at the North Shore Riverfront Park. Sponsored by [PNC](#), the event engages athletes and families of all ages and skills while showcasing Pittsburgh's rivers and trails. The races take place along the Allegheny River between PNC Park and Heinz Field. Participants and spectators experience the unique backdrops of the city skyline.

According to Baxter, Pittsburgh is one of only three cities in the country with an urban triathlon. Both the Triathlon and the Adventure Race have a bike and run portion, while the Triathlon has a swim start in the Allegheny River. The Adventure Race has a paddle in either a kayak or a canoe. The Triathlon draws people from all over the country and world to come to Pittsburgh for the unique opportunity to bike on the HOV lane, run along the North Shore and swim in the river.

- Pop Filter Hot Pick: Three Rivers Arts Festival

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"Pittsburghers are fortunate to have a network of trails and a stunning riverfront," said Renée Petrichevich of PNC's Corporate Communications department. "Even more, we're fortunate to have an outstanding organization like the Friends of the Riverfront to exercise such care in developing and preserving the trails that residents of our city use as they bike, hike, rollerblade or paddle along the beautiful shores."

To learn more or to become a Friend of the Riverfront yourself, visit [here](#)

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