

Hazleton's Trail Maker

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The hills around Hazleton have been marked with anthracite coal mines ever since coal was discovered in the area in the 1820s. Immigrants from Europe mined the coal and lived in “patch towns” such as Beaver Brook, Jeansville, Ebervale, Jeddo and Freeland. The Beaver Meadow Railroad and other early lines connected towns and carried the region’s “black diamonds” to loading docks on the Lehigh River in Mauch Chunk.



Bob Skulsky

The coal mines may be gone, but the old railroad beds still play a role in the region as recreational trails that connect people to history and nature. In Hazleton, one such trail – the Greater Hazleton Rails to Trails (GHRT) – follows the abandoned bed of the Delaware Susquehanna and Schuylkill Railroad, which opened in 1842 and later became part of the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

It's a very popular trail; last year the GHRT hosted 35,000 visits on its four miles. Visits should increase as more miles are added. A feasibility study done in 2000 recommended that the trail eventually be extended to the D&L Trail, a total of 16.2 miles from its starting point off East Broad Street in Hazleton. The GHRT will pass through Ashmore, Hazle Brook, and the historic mining community of Eckley, where the “Molly Maguires” movie was filmed in 1970 and which is now a restored mining village owned by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Operated by the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, the GHRT would be nothing without a strong volunteer corps under the direction of GHACP Executive Director, Bob Skulsky. Numbering nearly 300 men, women and children, GHRT volunteers have erected exercise stations, picnic tables, benches, and interpretive signs. They have developed an environmental education area, planted trees, installed drainage pipes, and set up a geocache system.

Skulsky does a great job getting all types of businesses and organizations involved in the trail. He taps into Scouts, Penn State-Hazleton Campus students, Hazleton Area School District students and teachers, the Keystone Job Corps, and any other group he happens to meet at the countless meetings

and events he attends. A former Department of Defense employee, Bob is a great recruiter – even without Uncle Sam posters.

But Skulsky doesn't recruit alone, and never has. Since its inception, the GHRT has had Sue Nasrani, another tireless person who has chaired the trail organization for more than 10 years. "Sue had a deep passion to develop this as a hiking and biking trail," Skulsky says. "She is always there when you need her, conducting meetings, shoveling dirt, attending outreach events, recruiting volunteers, donating money, and doing a host of other chores."

Nasrani and Skulsky have had to weather a lot of scary moments that threatened the trail, including floods, thunderstorm damage, and of all things, the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States. At the time, negotiations were underway with the Hazleton City Water Authority to obtain a right-of-way for the trail to pass through the company's land. Fearing that its reservoir, which bordered the trail and was city's water supply, could become a terrorist target, the Water Authority began opposing the trail. A lot of planning and hard work was about to go down the drain.

Fortunately, Skulsky and Nasrani and a handful of other ardent volunteers convinced the Water Authority to change its position after a series of meetings and briefings.

Since then, life along the GHRT has gone smoother, though not without hiccups. But when bumps occur, a couple of phone calls usually straighten them.

"Last fall we had 12 large bare-root trees that needed planting," Skulsky recalls of one of his more valiant volunteer experiences. "The trees had to be in the ground that day because of freezing weather that was forecast.

"A group of more than 30 Miners and Mechanics (MMI) Preparatory School students and teachers volunteered to help out, despite the rains, winds and cold. After the completion of the event the students, most covered with mud, came to me and sincerely thanked me for the opportunity for them to help out.

"That really amazed me under the conditions, but the students felt they had a very fulfilling day and felt a great sense of accomplishment and pride that they were able to become part of this community project. Sometimes simple comments like that can change a challenging day into a great day."

That is the nature of volunteering: challenges turned into successes because of people who put a cause above personal gain. Bob Skulsky and Sue Nasrani understand that completely, and because of it, there is little doubt in anyone's mind that the GHRT story will continue to evolve in a very positive way.