

My Memories of David Burwell, his Mother and the inspiring house in Woods Hole

When my first book came out in 1995, it was a kind of a hit and by 1996, the editors suggested that I begin a series of slide lectures about rail trails. I declined to go out “on the circuit” because I had never spoken in public before. Then two things happened.

In late 1996, I was at a town meeting in Southamptton, MA where the idea of a rail trail was very controversial. The opponents prevailed that night and it convinced me that I had to speak out on the subject. I had been on and researched over 60 trails by then, and never knew of a single project that was seen negatively after it was built and opened.

My first lecture was at the Hatfield Public Library before 2-3 people. I sweated the proverbial bullets and was the proverbial knock-kneed too. Around this same time, my publisher told me of a fellow in Eastern MA who was buying books by the case—and was giving them away at trailheads. As he gave a book to a trail user, he’d tell them how important these projects were. They weren’t the typical hiking type of trails that meandered around—they were important historical corridors that had a hand in how communities developed.

We had to track him down. When I called him, we chatted on the phone for an hour and hit it off. A few weeks later, we met for lunch and toured the trail near to his house in Lexington, MA— The Minuteman Rail Trail. Turns out that he was a major supporter of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and regularly talked with David Burwell, founder and president of RTC. He had been talking to David about my book and he was going to arrange for a meeting.

In early 1997, David Burwell gave me a call and after chatting a bit, invited me to meet him at his family homestead in Woods Hole on Cape Cod. Kathy and I met him at the house on a Saturday.

His mother, Barbara was there, too, and she proceeded to give Kathy a tour of the beautiful home overlooking Vineyard Sound. It was one of those large, but dignified, early 20th-century shingle style homes. Sweet.

David and I chatted about rail trails—for about 4-5 hours interrupted only by lunch. After it was over, he offered me a job at RTC. A part-time job, because I was still working for the railroad. But nonetheless it was a great opportunity and I seized it.

It was in 1997 when I started working for RTC that I first became aware of visionary people and how they



impact the lives of people they encounter—or the communities they live in. Of course David was one of those visionary people who came into my life. Though at that time, I had been on many trails, I didn’t connect the trail as being the catalyst for the community’s renaissance. I didn’t directly see or understand that when you convert a former RR corridor in a community and go from a derelict place to an attractive, welcoming place, this would spark a renaissance in that given community.

He hired me to be the point person in New England for RTC and my job was somewhat like Diogenes. Though instead of “looking for an honest man,” I was looking for visionary people in communities where former RRs existed. I needed those people to become leaders in their community where I would teach them how to convert the forgotten and unloved old railroad corridor to an attractive and welcoming place.

David taught me how to not only find the visionary people, he also taught me about “Place-Making” in the context of developing linear parks and why they were critically important in the Gateway Cities in Massachusetts—old industrial cities where large numbers of old forgotten railroad corridors were situated.

By the spring of 2000, I quit my position at the RR and began to work full time for RTC. I even opened an office in Worcester’s restored Union Station and became the first paying tenant there. I was doing 900 miles a week, traveling throughout New England building groups and teaching people how to speak compellingly on the issue of building a rail trail in their community—and how it was going to impact the community at large. Doing this job, I was getting used to having visionary people in my life.

Whenever David came into the Northeast for a fundraiser or a lecture before a transportation or environmentally-themed event, I was automatically invited and got to see him in action. He was an electrifying speaker who in a talk, would regularly zoom up in altitude for the “big picture” or visionary “take” on that subject, and then he’d come down in altitude to ground level to connect the issue to people in their day to day lives.

He left RTC in 2001, while I left in 2004. We stayed in touch with a phone call or email every several months or so. After leaving RTC, he went on to the Surface Transportation Policy Project. From 2001 until 2003, he was the CEO of the STPP, a volunteer transportation policy reform coalition that played a critical role in the enactment of ISTEA.

I didn’t leave the world of trail building either, though, as I set up Northeast Greenway Solutions (NEGS) and Central Highlands Conservancy. NEGS helps provide answers to the difficult questions surrounding trail development. I also usually do my lectures under the “flag” of NEGS.

I set up CHC to swoop in and buy stray pieces of the future Mass Central Rail Trail. This corridor shows up in state planning documents as the most important corridor to protect, so CHC was set up as a last stop to prevent sales to adjoining land owners. The state wasn't saving it, so I did. www.masscentralrailtrail.org

In 2009, I was invited to speak at a transportation conference at the Hyannis Transportation Center on Cape Cod. As a gift for coming out to speak, the organizers gave me a copy of the SpritSail magazine—a publication of the Woods Hole Historical Society.

This one, from 2002, was all about the history of how the Shining Sea Trail got built. And how David Burwell's mother was instrumental in getting it built. They also told me that Barbara Burwell passed away a couple of months earlier.

I knew that Barbara was involved in the creation of the Shining Sea Trail in Falmouth/Woods Hole, but until I read that booklet, I had no idea just how hard and complicated it was. [LINK HERE](#) to the booklet. And the most amazing thing was that David Burwell founded RTC because of his mother's experience in getting the trail built there when there was no national clearing house of info on how to do these uber complicated projects.

When you read the SpritSail booklet, you'll learn that there were a few policies that were created because of this trail being proposed. One was a reg that gives the state a right of first refusal on the sale of former railroad corridor. The second was an opportunity to review any proposed construction next to former railroad corridor. Strange thing is that looking at these rules, I haven't been able to find one example of these laws saving one inch of former corridor.

The other law that came about was a Supreme Judicial Court decision that ruled that a community could use Eminent Domain to piece together former railroad corridor for public use—like a trail—from a landowner who didn't want to sell. 2017 is the 40th anniversary of this decision.

About 2 years ago I mentioned to David that it would be prudent to get the state government to have a review of these rules about the state's right of first refusal on the sale of—or construction near—former railroad corridor.

We began to lay out a plan on how to get this done. Unfortunately, David was pretty frail by this time from a prior bout with leukemia and by the fall of 2016 it came

back and he was in the final fight. He passed away on February 1, 2017.

On Saturday, May 6, 2017, the family had a memorial event in Woods Hole at the family homestead, overlooking Vineyard Sound near to Nobska Light. There was a full capacity turnout of relatives, family friends, and old high school friends. All in the grand, big house on the shore. Over 100 people all total.

It was twenty years ago that I met the visionary who changed my life and here I was, twenty years later standing in that house once again. Wow.

This time, I'm there to chat with all the relatives and friends about how he impacted all of us. The stories were sometimes funny, sometimes inspiring, sometimes tearful, and over 20 people spoke. One of the speakers was a colleague of David's from the days when they both worked at the National Wildlife Federation.

He told how David was hearing from hunters in the Midwest who were losing their hunting grounds when the former railroad corridors were being taken over by adjoining landowners. He was full of interesting stories about how people came together to build RTC in the early, early days.

When it was my turn, I talked about how he taught me about finding visionary people and how that ability helps me beyond building trails. To this day, when I interview buyers who are locating here—and sellers needing to sell their houses—I will use those tools to find visionary people because I will always work best with them, now and in the future.

Though I was in this house only twice, I'll never forget. To read several of David Burwell's speeches and essays, [CLICK HERE](#).

