

Roy Alexander: From green cards to green spaces

By: Tony Brown, Staff Writer July 22, 2014



DAVIDSON – Roy Alexander, executive director of the Davidson Lands Conservancy, is one of those people you can't help but be in awe of.

At 71, he has literally spent his adult life in the service of others, and of the planet. And he's still at it.

After the Charlotte native picked up a bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry in 1964 at Davidson College – where he was in the ROTC – and a master's in teaching science from UNC Chapel Hill in '66, Alexander served for two years in the Army, but managed to stay out of Vietnam.

He returned to Charlotte to teach high school for four years, and in 1970 helped launch some of the Charlotte area's first Earth Day events at several Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools.

After that, Alexander became a 4-H agent for about a decade, working with kids, training leaders and designing programs on topics that included race relations at a time when Charlotte was dealing with school desegregation by busing.

1981 found him employed at the newly opened Discovery Place science museum, an organization he joined the previously year and helped get up and going, serving as director of the rainforest, aquarium and Earth sciences programs.

Some 19 years later, he was, as he described it, “downsized,” and spent the next few years “looking, and thinking about retiring.” He wound up working for two years as an adjudication officer for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, deciding who could become a citizen.

Somewhere in there, Alexander found time to get married, to now-retired Winthrop professor and associate dean Sue Peck, to have two children – a son who is 43 and a daughter, 38 – and now to have a bunch of grandchildren.

Along the way, he was among a group of like-minded conservationists who in 1991 founded the Catawba Lands Conservancy, a nonprofit group that helps keep the Charlotte region green. He still serves on a couple of the organization’s committees. About five years after some residents of the town where he went to college decided to found the much smaller Davidson Lands Conservancy, they asked Alexander in 2006 to bring his skills and experience to their group as a member of the organization’s board. On the Level will let him tell the story about how he became the part-time executive director – and only employee – of the organization, which operates on an annual budget of \$85,000.

The nonprofit Davidson group has more than 100 acres under easement from the landowners, easements that are held in perpetuity.

We’ll also let him explain how that works.

OtL met Alexander at one of his favorite Davidson Lands Conservancy projects, the Lake Davidson Nature Preserve, a densely wooded parcel on Jetton Road behind Davidson Day School, which owns the property.

We strolled the half-mile loop trail, checked out the canoe and kayak launch and storage racks, studied the flora and fauna signs, sat in the gazebo and admired the little section of eastern Lake Norman cut off by Interstate 77 that is known as Lake Davidson. The improvements were paid for by a \$22,000 grant from the REI outdoors store company.

Surrounded by private homes and condominiums, it is, according to Alexander, one of the only public areas on Lake Davidson where canoers and kayakers who don’t live on the lake can legally get their craft into the water.

This is really nice. Look at all those canoes and kayaks! There must be 100. People walking the trail with their dogs. I’d never have guessed it was back here. Fantastic.

So this is where canoers put in? No dock? We started this in 2011-12, and we’re still fighting to get the permit for a short floating dock – just a few feet out – from Duke (Energy). It’s the only public launch area that is legal.

Legal? There is a place on the Iredell (County) side, a road that leads right up to the lake and goes under it – the lake covered it up. People use that; it’s unofficial, and illegal, probably. This is just an example of the kind of role we play; we work mostly with private owners, but also with public entities, to enhance the land that is preserved. Let’s stop here for a moment. This is a really dense forest for this area. Notice how there have been primarily hardwoods to this point, and from here the pine forest starts. That’s a nice educational feature for the schools.

The Lake Davidson Nature Preserve is a publicly accessible easement on private property. Do you also do this kind of thing with government-owned land?

We hold an easement with Mecklenburg County on a nature preserve called Brackett Bluff, on Shearer Road, on the eastern edge of the county, along the Rocky River, a 61-acre preserve. We are waiting for development money for trails on that right now. We have an agreement with Mecklenburg to monitor and maintain an easement they hold with a town of Davidson park, Fisher Farm Park, which is also on Shearer Road in the very northeastern corner of the county, a 200-acre park. There are five miles of mountain bike trails, and some walking trails for pedestrians only.

How creative can you get with easements? One of the most unusual privately held easements we have, and would like to see more of, is 50 acres owned by a subdivision homeowners association as their common area, at Runnymede. It happened last year, and we would love to continue the practice with more subdivisions. We help them manage a heavily wooded area, dealing with forest issues such as invasive species and erosion, and we hope to help them qualify for grants. We ensure this will be preserved; it's unusual that they have 50 acres of beautiful mature trees and a great rock outcropping.

Is Runnymede publicly accessible? That one is private; that's an important distinction to make. An easement does not have to include public access. We love it when it does, but it is not required.

That's on Shearer Road, too, right? That's a lot of conservation on one road. Yes, and we hope that's going to continue to be a pattern; we want to create conservation corridor along the Rocky River. It's a very natural area. It is the county line with Cabarrus at that point. As we do more and more along that river, we would like to create more wildlife habitats and walking trails. It's on the Carolina Thread Trail master plan; that would connect us to 15 other counties. I joke with people that you could get on the thread trail here in Davidson and walk to the (Charlotte Motor) Speedway, and stop off at Concord Mills mall to shop and eat on the way. Heh-heh.

Ha. We also serve as an advocate for the government purchase and protection of natural areas, such as the West Branch Wetland Nature Preserve, at the confluence of the West Branch of Rocky River and the Rocky River, which culminates in the most significant wetland in this part of the state. It's 23 acres, and is surrounded by 60 acres of forested buffer land that draws into it. Mecklenburg County bought the whole 83 acres from a developer who wanted to sell it during the downturn, and we brought it to the county's attention and advocated for it. The county bought it with bond money. It's right off (N.C.) Highway 73 near the Cabarrus County line, right behind the Summers Walk development, between it and River Run (Country Club). It is outstanding for the richness of the ecosystem. There are 38 species of reptiles and amphibians and more than 120 species of plants. In each case, they are of every species you ought to find in this region, but you don't usually find all of them in each part of this region; this one's got 'em all. And it's important because that's nearly 90 acres being conserved in an area of intense development along Highway 73.

And that was paid for with bond money? Mecklenburg citizens ought to congratulate themselves on having passed several bond issues over the past decade or so.

I love backpacking into the backcountry of the Smokies. Being so far back into those billions-of-years-old mountains recharges my batteries and reminds me that I and my problems are but specks in the universe. Yes, there are those spiritual qualities which you mentioned, the quiet and solitude, and providing places for recreation – all that ought to be available without having to drive to the Smokies. But what we do is also to protect water quality for everybody, enhance the air quality, moderate air temperatures. We want to provide an adequate green infrastructure that is protected in perpetuity.

What's in it for the property owner granting the easement? They get tax breaks, both in property taxes and state and federal income taxes. Let's say (the land is) zoned residential now; with the easement it would be assessed as agricultural, at a lower rate. And it can be taken as a deduction on state income tax returns. If the property is assessed at, say, \$100,000 without the easement, and you give up enough development rights to reduce it to \$75,000, you can take a one-time \$25,000 charitable-gift deduction. On the federal side, instead of a deduction, you get a tax credit, which is even better. And I should also say it increases property values in an area, too. Proximity to conserved land is a definite value booster.

But the owners retain some property rights? Yes, you do retain some development and use rights. Let's say you grant an easement to us for 50 acres. You can still, say, put in two houses, one for your son and another for your daughter. And you can retain rights to timber, as long as it is done in a professional-quality, managed way.

You have such an interesting path to this job. I wish we had two hours. But I have to hear at least about those two years working for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. I interviewed people with green cards who had been here long enough to apply for citizenship and decide whether it should be granted to them.

Your decision was final or did you just make a recommendation? It was final; I was it.

Wow. I would think that would be fascinating – but really tough, too. I thought it was going to be a chance to hear some incredible stories, but it turned out you had 20 minutes to fill out a 10-page application, and give a test, too. It was a grind, is what it was.

But then you did land your dream job: This one. I came to work here in about 2006 as a board member. There was only one paid person, a part-time office manager. She had some child care issues and had to leave; so I said, "I'll take it if you call me executive director." It's the perfect retirement job. It's still part time and I'm doing what has been my passion for a long time, going all the way back to when I was a teacher. Besides, I can't just sit at home and watch game shows.

Yeah. I reckon your wife might have something to say about that. Heh-heh. That's right. I'm going to be here until they tell me, "That's it" and, "Bye."

