

Tribute to Lee Riggins Rich May 15, 2024

From Tyla Matteson
Chair, York River Group Sierra Club

We were sad to lose Lee Rich on December 28, 2023, at the age of 94. Lee joined the Sierra Club in 1997, was a life member, and a resident of York County, where she raised oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. She was an active, engaged member of the York River Group, serving on the group's ExCom, as group political chair and on the chapter's political committee. Three years ago Lee organized a program on the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, bringing attention to federal legislation which will enhance the refuge under the National Heritage Area Act. She put together another program that year on shellfish in the Chesapeake Bay and the importance of increasing the number of oysters in order to improve the health of the Bay. Lee received a chapter award in 2021 for her fine work.

Lee was immensely supportive to me and the York River Group as we planned programs and worked on local political endorsements. I miss her greatly – her kindness, perseverance, and astute analysis. She was a can-do environmentalist and “a force”, as I have heard some friends say. That is the best of compliments to a dear friend.

From Eileen Woll
Offshore Energy Program Director
Virginia Chapter Sierra Club

Lee's obituary notes that “an air of elegance always surrounded her.” So true.. and no small feat considering all the less than elegant, sausage-making that surrounds politics. Lee was quite politically savvy and knew well the value of a Sierra Club endorsement, leveraging it and the grassroots network behind that endorsement to ensure candidates and elected officials did right by the environment.

I like to think that Lee's elegance was inspired by the elegance of the natural world around her. Its beautiful systems also appealed to that mathematician in her. Nature is not only elegant but also tough, just like Lee. I remember her being kind of tough on me as I worked to recruit speakers for various presentations to her architect and engineering groups. Lee insisted that those speakers be expert experts.

Lee even carried that air of elegance when we marched Forward on Climate in Washington DC on a very frigid February day in 2013. I will never forget her beautiful face that day - her long wavy hair hanging out of her fake-fur lined hood, and inside that big furry hood was a little face with excited dancing eyes and of course bright red lipstick.

Lee was an inspiration to me. She was someone that reminded me that while we often work in gnarly spaces trying to protect Mother Earth we should be inspired by the beautiful natural world and natural process and approach that work with elegance, dignity and grace.

From Chris Rumsey, York River Group webmaster and blogger
NASA Langley Research Center aerospace engineer

Well over 10 years ago, I first met and worked with Lee Rich as part of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) Hampton Roads Section, at NASA. This group is primarily made up of aeronautical engineers, and Lee was a major part of it for many years. When I was involved, she was its Public Policy Chair. Lee was perfect for this position, because she seemed to know EVERYBODY. She almost magically arranged many amazing events for our group involving local politicians and other leaders, typically having them address the importance of engineering, science, and education. After AIAA, I would still run into Lee quite often at the NASA fitness center. She was always keen to learn what was happening within AIAA and NASA. She was also always eager to discuss the latest political topics and give her opinions in no uncertain terms. She seemed to be involved in so much. It was hard to believe how much energy she had! And when I later joined the local Sierra Club,... surprise surprise... there was Lee again! Deeply involved and passionately pushing for the betterment of the world, at least our corner of the world. This time her focus was on the environment, just like she passionately pushed for so many other incredibly important issues.

From Elizabeth Wilkins and Jacques van Montfrans
Sierra Club members, living in Yorktown, VA

We got to know Lee over the years through activism around many of the same causes, and knew her to be a fierce (and fearless) advocate for the environment. In particular, we met up at Hands Across the Sands rallies for clean energy, and when fighting Dominion Energy to clean up coal ash dumpsites across Virginia and locally at the York County superfund sites, among other campaigns.

We hadn't heard from Lee in the last few years, when everyone was keeping a lower profile in the wake of Covid, but then last Spring (2023) we got a frantic call from her. "WHAT IN THE HE'LL IS GOING ON IN YORKTOWN WITH THESE CRUISE SHIPS -HAVE THOSE PEOPLE LOST THEIR MINDS?" and, (since we live in Yorktown Village) "WHAT ARE YOU ALL DOING ABOUT IT???" She proceeded to give us lots of great wisdom about how to fight it, then made phone calls and sent emails to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, using her influence to try to shame them into action against these large cruise ships coming to tiny Yorktown. And through the summer she occasionally called for updates and to check to make sure we were still "on track". Our personal efforts on behalf of Preserve Yorktown, the group formed to fight Princess Cruise Lines, were championed and encouraged by her throughout. And we're sorry she didn't live to see Princess drop its so-called pilot program for this year, but no doubt she would have been very pleased.

We can only hope that into our nineties environmental issues will remain a high priority for us, and that we can continue our advocacy with her level of passion and energy...she will always be a great inspiration - thank you, Lee.

From Gwyn Williams, York River Group member
Living in Yorktown, VA

Lee was my neighbor, and I saw her frequently during my, and her daily walks. Our discussions were always engaging and interesting, sharing similar world views. Lee cared as much for her neighbors as she did for the Sierra Club - really cared. She was someone you could definitely count on in an hour of need, and in that respect my relationship with her ran deeper than with most neighbors. She provided much advice, but I was able to return some of it concerning rooftop solar and geothermal heating and cooling. Lee was always wanting to learn new things, and what a wonderful frame of mind that was. When she found out that I had honey bees, she asked me to help her get her own colony. When I was inspecting this colony, she would nearly always come out to help and learn. My wife, children and I miss her enormously, but are very happy to have her daughter and family now in our neighborhood.

From Jennifer Knight, Assistant Principal at Salem High School, Virginia Beach

I was honored to work alongside Lee on the Board of the Friends of the Great Dismal Swamp. I will always remember observing her ability to stay issue-focused and resolution driven. She taught me the importance of hearing everyone and being able to work with everyone despite our differences. As I continue to advocate for my community, I often ask myself how Lee would have advocated for the issue at hand. She made me think deeply and critically. I miss our telephone conversations—she had so much wisdom to share, but I will always look back and smile and giggle when I think of her ending a telephone conversation. When she was finished talking to you, she was done! “Okay, thank you, bye!” It was endearing. I was blessed to call Lee my mentor and friend.

Kind regards, Jennifer Knight

From Ann Creasy, Field Director, Virginia Chapter Sierra Club, Norfolk, VA

I send my regards and deep respect to Lee for the life that she lived. She was a dedicated, active Sierra Club member and significant community member. I am so grateful for what Lee contributed to our movement and for what her work will contribute to our communities and ecosystems.