

(Caskey - word count: 1,202)

Sarah West: Gem of the Wissahickon

Petite and fast, she scrambles up rocks too treacherous for half the students in her class. While she uses a cane, she doesn't need to. "It was a gift from FOW, but I don't really need it" she says "I use it to chase dogs that are off leash". Sarah West hops up on a rock and raps her stick on a huge jutting rock mass, black fractured stone shot throughout with wavy and rippling threads of white. "This is gneiss," she says, pointing out the white ripples. "When it was formed, it would have been like Silly Putty, thousands of degrees in temperature, but still soft and not completely molten." The rock here in the Wissahickon Gorge, Sarah's theory goes, exploded above ground more than 200 million years ago. As Pangea formed, it's possible that this was an island, crashing into the land mass that is now North America. Everywhere in this park, the Wissahickon Gorge, there are massive rock formations jutting diagonally out of the earth, as though some god below shoved them willy nilly out of the way.

At 78 years old, Sarah has been instrumental in bringing an educator-slash-steward-slash-advocate approach to what it means to care for and maintain natural and wild city spaces. In the Wissahickon Valley Park in Philadelphia PA, she found her calling. "She's served as an incredible mentor and motivator to Trail Ambassadors [other trail educators] and all the volunteers," says Sarah Marley, Outreach Coordinator for the stewardship group, Friends of the Wissahickon. "She has given so much to the TAs since joining the group in 2008 but she was certainly volunteering and involved with FOW well before then."

Across the United States, people are spending more time outdoors in local parks and trail systems, hiking, walking, running, taking kids in strollers or mountain biking. Hidden behind the scenes in these recreation areas are armies of volunteers who design, build, maintain and steward these open spaces. Sarah is one such person, a former biology teacher who in retirement has dedicated her time to teaching about the Wissahickon Valley Park.

She has been credited with helping build critical mass of interest in nature and wildlife specific to the Wissahickon, itself part of the larger, 1,800-acre park known as the Fairmount Park System. One

of the largest urban parks in the country, Fairmount Park consists of 63 separate parks, totaling 9,200 acres, of which the Wissahickon is one.

Within the Wissahickon Valley Park is the geographical highlight of the region, if not the state: the Wissahickon Gorge. The Gorge is a unique geological formation like none found anywhere else on earth. In 1992, Sarah literally wrote the book on the Gorge, “Rediscovering the Wissahickon”. Her book opened up a new awareness of geology walks and history walks along the Wissahickon Creek that many visitors, as well as other volunteer hike leaders and naturalists, started to follow.

What Sarah has tried to help people “rediscover” is 250 million years of natural history. For the million-plus park visitors each year, this unique geological record is literally under their feet. In her geology walks, she teaches groups of adults and young people about plate tectonics and the centuries of activity that have occurred here in this little slice of the Delaware Valley. Like an optical illusion that once pointed out to you is impossible not to see, once you see the forces at work, you can’t avoid thinking in geologic time. It puts a million-year timeframe “sustainable management” of the park system.

Born and raised in Woburn outside of Boston, Sarah credits her summers on the Maine coast with her deep love of nature. “We lived in Friendship Island [Maine] the entire summer, and could run anywhere we wanted,” she remembers. “I grew to love marine biology; we could examine the animals, the plants and sea creatures. It’s led me directly to my love of nature and natural systems.”

Sarah studied biology education at Yale and went on to teach at Temple University after her father discouraged her from becoming a lawyer (since “no one will hire you”). After she married, her husband obtained a professorship at Temple University, and she taught there as well before leaving to teach upper school biology at the prestigious Germantown Friends School. She was for decades, she lived and worked within close reach of the Wissahickon.

After 25 years of teaching, Sarah started volunteering with the Friends of the Wissahickon, reconnecting her love of nature and the wild by conducting geology walks, history talks and other volunteering efforts. “I was helping [the FOW] work on the mission statement, and it incorporated education and advocacy, two areas where I was excited to help.” Unfortunately, her husband’s illness in 2003 required her to leave the board, and it wasn’t until after her husband’s death that she continued her involvement with the Wissahickon and the FOW. She became one of the first class of Trail Ambassadors in 2008. The Trail Ambassador program started as an experiment in giving volunteers a

deeper knowledge about the ecosystems and history of the park to better serve the public. Today, it has become an integral part of the FOW's mission, with over 200 TAs providing educational programs, instruction, and guidance for visitors to the Park.

Both as a board member and a Trail Ambassador, Sarah has helped shape the mission of the FOW into one that protected the unique natural resources in this area, as well as fostered a sense of participatory science to be practiced in the park through walks, talks, instruction and adopting policies that helped maintain what has become a popular public resource. Sarah notes that when she takes people out on the trail to learn about history or geology, it's important to make people feel like they've learned something interesting. "I try to make sure they learn at least a couple interesting facts; people want to feel like they've learned something new. It's what keeps them connected to the park."

Scott Quitel, CEO of LandHealth Institute and a FOW Trail Ambassador, points to her book as being instrumental in increasing the recognition of the special features of the Wissahickon Gorge. "She was one of the first to publicize the many features of the Park that were unique, and worth saving," he recalls. "Her book has directly led to the educational programs in the Park, the Trail Ambassador program, and other efforts to make the park a living thing."

Sarah also wrote a book about minerals that are found in the Wissahickon, although they are fragments and nothing that is of jewel-quality. "Gems of the Wissahickon" describes a variety of crystals found embedded in the schist due to the high pressure and temperatures of metamorphic turbulence. Leading her students, no matter how many times she does this walk, she still points out breathlessly the garnets, kyanite and tourmaline that her students are missing directly under foot.

It's hard to miss the gems in each of Sarah's walks, as they are literally everywhere under foot. Through her teaching and advocacy, Sarah has expanded the knowledge and understanding of thousands of visitors to the Wissahickon Valley. Of all the gems of the Wissahickon, Sarah herself is the brightest.

##