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Jonetta Rose Barras: Water works

By: **Jonetta Rose Barras**
Examiner Columnist
August 23, 2009

I took a scrawny little kid out here 15 years ago. Who was it? Mayor [Adrian M.] Fenty," said James R. Foster, president of the Anacostia Watershed Society, sharing a story about the future politician.

I and others — mostly District residents like Misty Brown and photographer Bruce McNeil — stood in the parking lot at the

Bladensburg Waterfront Park listening as Foster, then Irv Sheffield of the Sierra Club and Dennis Chestnut of Groundworks provided background for the tour of the Anacostia River we were scheduled to take.



"Until two generations ago, people were in this river," Foster explained. The river was their prime mode of transportation and vehicle for commerce. It fed them. They were baptized in it and played in it. As a boy growing up in the District's Ward 7 Deanwood neighborhood, Chestnut and his friends swam in the Anacostia; city pools frequently discriminated against African-Americans.

As a young girl, I fell in love with the Mississippi River. Even now, when I go home to New Orleans, I return to its shores and am captured by its magic.

"You can't have a healthy community if the river is sick," Foster lamented. "The Anacostia River is the biggest contributor of trash to the Potomac. Everything that happens on the land comes to the river."

It does. I spotted that sparkling morning a soccer ball, a basketball, several plastic foam cups, plastic bottle, and potato chip bags. I had come, they told me, on a good day.

The river men and a coalition of environmental groups have pushed for the Anacostia's cleanup. Sheffield explained the "Triple A" strategy of awareness, appreciation and action. Chestnut and Groundworks have focused on residents in Wards 7 and 8 who should have more of a relationship with the Anacostia River.

Despite the trash, a Blue Heron was seen and so were ospreys. Egrets were diving for breakfast while geese and cranes stood nearby. A small family of turtles jumped into the water from a piece of driftwood. A woman kayaked and men fished.

I never found the bags for which I was looking, and still oppose the law, but who, I wondered, wouldn't want to restore the Anacostia — if only to replicate the scene that Sunday when the rest of the world ceased to exist while my boat mates and I cruised, listening to Foster spin the river's tales.

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