

Lynne Kolze Transcript
Voices of the River
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By Anne Queenan

AQ: I always start off and ask people to tell me about their family ethnic heritage and just how you came to Minnesota?

LK: I'm originally from Illinois, from the Chicago area, where most of the Kolze's came from. They farmed what is now O'Hare Field, and so they came from very simple stock and my mother's side was German and Scottish. My grandmother came from Scotland, so I'm definitely a mix. And both of my parents had an intense love of nature, which is why I ended up here.

Every year they hunted and fished in Illinois, and they took us camping every year on Apple River. The Apple River Canyon is where we camped every fall several times. And that experience just fundamentally changed me and made me very passionate about trying to protect the environment. It's very deep in me; that place means more to me than probably anywhere on earth. And their ethic of conservation is very, very deep, even to this day.

And because of that, and I remember reading a National Geographic when I was 12 years old that talked about the decline of the bald eagle, and how they were dying from DDT poisoning. And I think that's probably the point in my life where I knew I had to do something in this field, in the environmental field. So I got a degree at the University of Wisconsin in lake management and natural resource management and did some internships in the Chicago area for Lake Michigan and really enjoyed that. But I felt that I really was not as much interested in the details of science as I was in policy and people and what made people do the right things for the environment or not.

So I went on to get a degree in public administration from Indiana University, and from there went to work for the Environmental Protection Agency in Chicago and in Washington, DC, which was a great experience. But I think as time went on, I felt that it was so removed from real rivers and lakes. It was very far removed from the real work with the people and that's really what I craved doing. So I found out about an opportunity in Minnesota, to work on the Minnesota River, and the thought of that just excited me very much, the thought of working on a real river and a real project, where I could actually go down and put my big toe in the river. That was really very appealing to me. And so, I was very lucky to get that job.

That's how I became a Minnesotan. I worked on the Minnesota River and I was very glad to come here. I was very impressed by the ethic, the land ethic in Minnesota. It's very much the culture, which I did not find growing up in Illinois. Very different. It's very different, and we were the oddballs in Illinois

for loving camping and hunting and fishing, as you could imagine.

AQ: So, this is an oral history project on the history of the modern movement to clean up the Minnesota River which we say began in the late 1980s surrounding the Mn River Assessment Project and the Citizen's Advisory Committee that you convened to review the findings of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Assessment of the river and come up with its recommendations.

Is that when you think this movement began? Can you tell us what you think?

LK: My personal experience started in 1990, so I wasn't really here for the initial work that was done. My colleague, Tim Larson and also Wayne Anderson, were involved in talks with EPA because there were a lot of concerns about the river because it hadn't met water quality standards and I think for some time. And so my history really starts in 1990 and that was, we're in the middle of this study, but we know, we need to get out there talking to people about what we're learning and what should be done about the problems. And so that's really where my involvement started, was trying to figure out, okay, what do we do. This is a big part of Minnesota, this is a really complex area, lots of diverse stakeholders involved, so what, where do we start. It took a while to really formulate an approach and decide what we wanted to do.

So that was how I got involved, was trying to figure that out.

AQ: So just continuing on with that, then, if you can just tell us your earliest experiences and some of the chronological course of events and projects that came along with that and this Citizen's Movement so to speak?

LK: I guess some of my earliest experiences were being taken out by my colleague Tim Larson, who had spent time in the river for several years doing water quality monitoring and so forth. Meeting a man named Dell Wehrspann in Montevideo, and I remember sitting around his kitchen table and him talking about the river and he was truly a pioneer at the time of being outspoken in his concern for the river. And I remember, first of all, being so impressed by the hospitality of him and his wife Shirley to a total stranger from Washington DC. I had just come from Washington, DC, and taking me into their home and sharing their concern. And we just hit it off, and it still is a great friendship. And again, they really impressed me, 'cause no one was paying them to care about the river. It was just who they were and what they really were passionate about. And then to put yourself out in the community where it was not always popular to care about the river and the pollution, to put it out there at risk of your stature in the community, that takes a lot of, something very special in somebody. And I really admired that.

So it was meeting him, and then later Scott Sparlin, who was another amazing figure, a citizen who just really cared tremendously, knowing them, meeting them, just fundamentally changed my life in terms of being real models of citizenship and caring and passion and willing to put it out there and take some risks. That's not something you find in everybody.

So seeing the interest that a couple people can raise and that truly a couple people can change the world, because I think the two of them were very much integral in this whole project getting underway. And they were two of the members, some other wonderful, wonderful members on the Citizens Advisory Committee that we put together. So we were very thoughtful and intentional about membership on that committee, trying to get a very diverse group of stakeholders involved from all different parts of the Basin. We were trying to balance gender and ethnicity and interests and tried to be very fair about it. And we got really 23 or 25 people on that committee that didn't always agree, but it always a very respectful discussion if they didn't agree on something. We had a fabulous facilitator for that process who was Ron Nargang who was at the time the Deputy Commissioner of the DNR. And he was absolutely remarkable in his ability to make that diverse group of people very functional, and I think they have fun.

And the even more remarkable part of that entire experience was that many of those members are still active today, almost 20 years later in advocating for the river in one way or another, and often show up at meetings. Many of them still come to meetings to this day, together, it's really quite remarkable. So we coordinated meetings for that committee for a little over two years, brought in a lot of different speakers that represented different sides of the issues that the river was facing in terms of drainage, wetland loss, agriculture, urban runoff. We had speakers on a lot of different topics. They had time to talk together about what they'd heard and so there was a lot of, we tried to incorporate a lot of dialogue into the process.

And I worked with Brian Stehnquist from the DNR, who's a fabulous, wonderful facilitator and group planning process person, and he and I worked together to plan the meetings so they were effective. And I hope enjoyable for the people to participate in.

So I saw people learn a great deal and they listened to each other very well, and they came up with some very bold recommendations for how to improve the river, which I think really are still influential in terms of kind of developing a framework or way of thinking about where we need to go to get the river restored.

AQ: What was the function of the Citizens Advisory Committee? You had the Minnesota River Assessment Project, and then you formed this committee with all these different stakeholders. What was the purpose of that?

LK: I think the idea was that we knew that many of the problems that faced the Minnesota River, even today, are caused by non-point sources of pollution. They're not tied to a single source; they're basically caused by land uses, various types of land uses. So runoff from anything from streets and parking lots to farm land. You can have bank erosion; all of these sources can contribute to degraded water quality. So we knew that because the causes of pollution were so complex, that we had to have a complex array of people involved in helping us figure out the solutions, and we hoped that they would, as part of learning about the river, they would become ambassadors for it with us. And I think that's what happened. Their love of the river and their sense of having an obligation to do something was very real as a result of it.

AQ: So what would you say your role has been in that movement? Your specific role?

LK: You know, looking back, I think probably the thing I do best is I connect people and I cheerlead. I find people who have similar interests and I put them together. I say, well do you know about something that so and so is doing? And try to find them resources to do the work that they do well. And I think, for example, Scott Sparlin, I think got his start with some funding from our agency because we advocated for him; we saw something in him. And if anything I probably was a cheerleader, advocate and connector with people, and I think that's probably still one of my functions today that I'm doing in my job. It's something I love and enjoy 'cause I see the potential in people and I try to connect them. And people like Scott and Dell and I, we all kind of had that connection of the same passion and maybe stubborn optimism or something together.

AQ: So when it comes to cleaning up the Minnesota River then, really what lies in the heart of that issue for you? What is at the heart of it?

LK: I think I'm motivated even in the work I'm doing today for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. I think I'm motivated by anybody who's affected by a problem having a voice in deciding what should be done about it, and in trying to rekindle our interest in being a citizen again, in being more than someone criticizing from the sidelines to being actively involved in trying to solve something. And I believe in my heart that under the right circumstances if people are given the right opportunity in a safe environment to be part of something that's bigger than themselves, they'll almost invariably want to be part of something like that. And I think many people are fed up with the way things are happening in government and politics and want to do something, but don't always know what to do. And I think if the right venue comes along, you make it safe, people will respond and want to do something for their community. And I really believe in the goodness of people and that we believe that we're red and blue, but I really think that's exaggerated, that people are much more purple than we think, and there's a lot more commonality than we believe. And those are the things that really motivate me because there's

a lot of public issues, not just environmental, but public issues in general that really need people. They need people to participate in a more meaningful way. I think without that, I don't know how we'll solve a lot of these very complex issues, wicked problems they call them, that we have. And I just get so much hope and optimism from working with people that are willing to step forward. And I know there are millions of them out there. That's what keeps me going.

(private)

AQ: Can you tell us about the various agencies and the organizations that are involved in this work and what's your relationship with them?

LK: I've work for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency for 22 years, and I worked in water for the majority of that time. I've also done a variety of other jobs there as well, but I've always felt kind of drawn back to the water program, 'cause this is what I love and I just have to do. And I currently have been given the very challenging task of trying to increase citizen involvement in all watershed planning across the state. And so myself and a colleague and a person at each of our regional offices has been tasked with trying to provide the planning frameworks, the assistance, the support, the funding, etc. for all the watershed projects across the state that are trying to restore or protect their water bodies. And so that's my current job. In all of the work I've done for the agency, we've always had a great deal of inter-agency cooperation. I know people don't believe that, but we really have always had tremendous involvement across DNR, Board of Water and Soil Resources, Department of Ag, university, you name it. I mean we work with people, especially right now in the work I'm doing, we're working across many, many agencies trying to coordinate this important work, 'cause it's not really the work of the PCA alone. All agencies need to be shifting their philosophy about citizen engagement, providing some staff to support that work, and the funding, and working with the local governments to allow that to happen, which we really have not been highly supportive of in the past. So this is a big shift that we're trying to make. Culturally within the organization, where we're mostly full of people with science backgrounds, trying to start an incremental shift toward more of the people side, the social side of watershed management. So that's what I'm doing now and have always really enjoyed and believed in the importance of trying to work across many agencies, because we all have a piece of some of this work in our work. So we have to try to be as efficient as possible and bring the strengths from all of these organizations together, which is not easy to do. It really isn't. It's complex; we have very complex laws and programs that we have to figure out how to kind of synthesize that for the good of water quality.

AQ: When you think back about your work restoring the Minnesota River, what is it you're most proud of?

LK: I think I'm just proud of the fact that the agency took the risk of organizing and coordinating the work of the citizen group, and also that we did a great deal to raise awareness. That's step one. I think the culture within the river basin has shifted. It's taken 20 years, but there's been a cultural shift in how people think about the river, more than there certainly was 20 years ago, and I think we started that whole kind of ball rolling. And I think my colleague, Tim Larson, did a great deal, he did a lot of public speaking, as I did, all over that basin, showed up at meetings, showed we cared. I think all of that and working with these phenomenal people that were out in the river basin really got things going. It was kind of like getting a ball rolling downhill for the first time, and I think that I'm just proud that I was part of that and that it's continued to this day, and that people do think differently about the river.

What I'm hoping happens over time is, you know in the beginning, I think I was one of those people among many that were about trying to blame some group or some, certain kinds of land use for the problems in the river. It was all about the blame game. That was a big part of it. And I'm hoping that we're moving away from that to more of, okay there's a problem, it doesn't really matter who's at fault, we're all at fault really. So how do we move from blame to a collaborative, deliberative effort to move forward, where we just all say, what can I personally do that would benefit the river? It doesn't really matter; maybe I have no impact at all. Maybe there's something I can do. Just getting people to think more in those terms instead of being defensive or feeling they had the finger pointed at them. That's never an answer, never an answer. So I'm hoping over the 20 some years we're slowly shifting from trying to find someone to blame to a more, people feeling a moral obligation to do the right thing, no matter what, no matter their part. I'm hoping that's the future.

(audio 009)

AQ: So when Governor Arne Carlson pronounced that the Minnesota River needed to be cleaned up in ten years, what did you think of that particular piece of history?

LK: Well first of all, I was thrilled that he even made that kind of a commitment. That was fantastic. It was just what we needed at the time to increase the level of concern for the river, and that he cared enough to come out and say that. At the time, I think myself and some of my colleagues felt that was a very ambitious goal that he had set. It was I think he said to clean up the river in ten years, if I recall. And that seemed very difficult. I mean with non-point sources of pollution, improvements often show up slowly over many, many years, and that's very difficult for Americans I think to grasp or accept that change in water quality happens over many years. There's often not a quick fix, which I think most of us wish there were, but we know better.

So I was thrilled he was there, but I think we knew it was a very ambitious and probably not possible goal to me. But it did, I think, was part of propelling the whole project forward, so it was important. I really appreciate it even more in retrospect, because we haven't seen any other governor take a position like that that I'm aware of.

AQ: When you think back, you've talked about what you're most proud of. What has been your biggest frustration?

LK: I think the whole track we've been in about blaming has been a big frustration, and it's just made us spin our wheels and not get as far as we could have over the period of time that I've been working at the state.

I think the fact that we still have not fully supported citizen involvement in water quality work. We are moving in that direction, but we have a long way to go. We don't really, I think at state agencies we have not yet understood the potential power of that in terms of helping us get our job done, and all this potential that's out there that hasn't been tapped to be creative about solutions. I read once that there's some government agencies that are actually, they have prizes, they pay people to come up with innovative solutions to problems. And I think the more minds you put on something, the better.

And I'm hoping that we will continue to involve citizens in our work and really encourage dialogue as a big, big part of that, because I think the only way people really do fundamentally integrate change is through dialogue, talking with one another, learning from one another, having to struggle through problems together. And that's what I saw in that Citizen's Advisory Committee, was the really, almost the beauty of struggle in a group, that they have to work through challenging times to come out on the other end and come to some level of agreement. Even then, there were people at the end that didn't feel that they could agree with those ten recommendations or so that they developed, but they were free to develop their own minority report, and that gave them freedom to speak their mind. That's a really good thing.

But I think a lot of our social problems, especially surrounding water, have to be addressed through very patient, deliberative dialogue and people often find they experience remarkable change as a result, internally, personally, professionally, when they have to be faced with people with opinions different than their own. And that's how you reach great solutions, is compromise often.

(Audio 010)

AQ: What do you know about the Minnesota River Board or the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance?

LK: I can't say that I have personal experience with either of them because I have not worked directly on the Minnesota River for a number of years. So I have only heard bits and pieces about the work that they've done over the years. I really don't feel like I can say much about them.

AQ: And what do you think of the Upstream Downstream Friendship Tour process that has recently been embarked upon?

LK: I think it's a phenomenal model for what we need to be doing.

I think that the Upstream Downstream Friendship Tour was a really wonderful innovation and where we need to be going, because it was really all about trying to see what we had termed in the past as people who are our enemy, people who didn't agree with us, trying to really see those people as human beings, as complex as we are, people who have the values and beliefs they do for a reason, trying to understand those reasons, why they feel the way they do, not trying to label people as right or wrong, but just as different from us.

And listening, listening. I don't think we've been really given enough opportunities or venues to really listen to people who don't agree with us about a particular issue. And that was to me the beauty of it, is putting people on a bus, moving around the Minnesota River Basin, learning, seeing things together, having an opportunity to dialogue about what they'd seen and what they had, kind of what their feelings about those things were. And just seeing that we're all part of this, we're all part of the solution, that we do need each other no matter if we don't agree on everything.

So that to me is a really great start. I think what we need in addition to that though are kind of small scale processes like that. That was a very big thing to undertake. It was kind of looking at the whole Minnesota River Basin. But to try that kind of technique in a smaller community, and then having it as part of a greater strategy or approach to citizen involvement, where those conversations would be sustained over time, I think that's where you would really see some really outstanding outcomes from that. If people are allowed to learn together and then move toward a solution, over time, over repetitious meetings, where they have to work toward an answer to a particular problem.

So I really think it's a fantastic starting point for the work we need to do, which is about deliberative dialogue. That's really, I think, going to get us there. That and good science. Good science is very important.

AQ: The next question is about the TMDL process. Total Maximum Daily Load. I know you're familiar with that as you work for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. What do you think about it, and can you share your attitudes and beliefs about TMDL?

LK: Looking back at many years to the original language that was put in the Clean Water Act, this was really about just creating some accountability I think, around different water bodies around the country that were impaired, trying to ensure that something was done to try to fix those problems, trying to get people to do the science necessary, get them on a schedule, and get some things done. So I think the concept really was not bad at all. It was necessary; it was good, but I think in trying to actually implement that, there have been a lot of challenges and struggles around how much science is enough science, are we doing the right kinds of studies, when do we call quits to it.

And it really does not put a lot of emphasis on citizen involvement either, which I believe, without that, we have the danger of TMDLs basically being documents that sit on a shelf.

So I think, it's not a bad concept in general, but it does need to have an added component to it, which is much greater citizen involvement if those studies are going to amount to anything.

AQ: So where do you see things going from here? What does the next 25 or 30 years hold for the Minnesota River?

LK: I guess I'm really very hopeful. I couldn't have dreamed in my wildest imagination 20 years ago that we would be this far.

And even though I know people might laugh at that and still go down to the river and see that it has a lot of problems and whatever, but I really do believe that we're on the right track and as people become more and more aware of the connections between land use and water quality and their personal piece of that, I guess I do have hope that the culture will continue to shift and our water will become so precious to us for a variety of reasons, because there's going to be so many increasing pressures on our water bodies, that people will be required to engage more in trying to find solutions. And I'm very hopeful.

I actually had a dream once that I was kind of walking along the river and it was absolutely like Shangri la. And hopefully that will come true someday, even if I have to get there in my wheelchair to see that. I really do believe that there will be an awakening as water becomes more and more of a, as there are more shortages and we have more issues with drought, people will transform their relationship with water and we'll continue to see improvements. So I'm very hopeful.

AQ: I only have one other question, and it's to tell us about the floods of '65, '97, 2002, and the changing hydrology of the Minnesota River.

LK: Well because of the really significant changes in land use that we've made over the years, and again, I'm not going to get into the blame thing, but because all of us are part of this situation, but the tremendous changes in land use have truly impacted the river and we have created an extremely efficient system for moving water off the land to the river. And that has been very beneficial for cities and for the farming communities, but it does have serious downsides, which is the flashness of the river, the ease with which it floods, and those are going to be very challenging issues to address because it's going to affect all of us in some way or another, perhaps through higher taxes or prices for goods, if we're really going to address them.

So that they do have some really interesting, creative, new designs for drainage systems, that I think are very, very hopeful, that can hold the water on the land a little bit longer. Maybe that would help; maybe we'll see some additional areas return to wetland, to try to hold some of the water in on the landscape.

So I think it's going to take a multi-point effort to reduce flooding and it's again, there's no quick fix to this. If we continue to want to do the kind of farming we do and we want food prices to remain low and so forth, I think it's going to take some creativity to really address those issues.

(Audio 011)

AQ: Could you say that again, about scale? (now, I'm recording.) We were talking about a farmer in Clarkfield MN who is getting other farmers and environmentalists to come in and see some of the conservation measures that he's been putting into place on his farm where the Yellow Medicine River is digging into the channel. So there's erosion and problems with how the land is relating to the water. And so he's got these various methods that are being put in. And all of the agencies that you talked about are involved. Every one of them. But on a local basis. There is matching dollars from state and federal, but it's a local team that's working together.

LK: Yes, well I think that's where you tend to see the most successful things happen on the smallest scale.

I became aware of some work being done in Iowa in a watershed. A group of farmers that were basically cut loose to develop their own solutions to a problem where they had impaired water. And these farmers became very creative when left to their own devices. They became very creative about finding solutions that really worked for them and did it at a very low cost by and large. And I think that's a model that we've tried to replicate here in the Whitewater River and they're doing some great things there as well in terms of

really people, again, not being told how to do something, and being treated in this kind of almost teacher-student kind of relationship, but more as an equal, having them figure out what to do to address a particular problem in their community.

And that model and that scale of a small, I think that was on a township scale, proved very effective. They got high participation, people really becoming interested in trying to address the problem their own way.

I think that's where we need to be headed with a lot of our impaired waters, is trying to create opportunities where people can feel a sense of autonomy, try to master something new to them, because it is very interesting. This work is very interesting when you really get into learning about water quality. And people having a sense of purpose and meaning, something greater than themselves.

And that, there's an author named Daniel Pink that talks about those three things, autonomy, mastery, and purpose, as being what make people very productive in a workplace. But I think those same elements are what we need to tap in the general population, and create the right venue so they can become more autonomous in creating solutions, mastering the content of why water is the way it is, and how it can be proved, and feeling like they're really contributing something to the greater good. I really think that's where we need to be headed in many ways, the environmental field in general, but certainly in water quality.

AQ: So you work and you believe in working with the people?

LK: Yes, because I believe in the ability of people to find solutions and work together if they're given safe, structured, well-run processes to do it in. That's what's really, I think, has been lacking is we have not made a study of how to involve people in a really fun, engaging way that gives them a sense of meaning. They're doing something important; they're really contributing something important to something beyond themselves. People I believe are really yearning for that right now.

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(Audio 012)

AQ: Historically, when you think about the number of years and the time, the efforts that have been going on and continue to, based on your experience and history with the Minnesota River, what is your insight or thought on the amount of time it's taken so far and moving forward?

LK: I think in general, we as Americans have been, we expect quick results for everything, fast turnarounds and things to be accomplished very quickly. I think because of the complexity of what we're dealing with, I'm hoping that the public can stick with us over time because this does take many years to address water quality problems, when you're talking certainly a scale as big as the Minnesota River Basin.

But even on a lake or something like that, it does take a good deal of time to organize the people, to find the funding, to encourage people to do something differently on the landscape that might improve water quality. And then, sometimes the environment just doesn't respond as quickly as we would like. So I'm hoping that people hang with us and realize that this is a long-term commitment, potentially a perpetual commitment of effort in order to keep water quality healthy.

It really is a reflection of how we live on the land and it's something that we have to continue to be committed to or we're just going, if we see improvements we could see those deteriorate if we don't stay on guard and work kind of in perpetuity on continuing to improve land use practices and so forth. So patience is absolutely essential in this world, it really is.

AQ: OK. So, now, just for my own storytelling ... Can you tell me about the place in Illinois that means so much to you?

LK: Interestingly, my grandfather befriended someone who owned a farm, that part of his property is in Apple River Canyon, and we have been camping on that land for five generations. It's pretty phenomenal. So it's so deep in our family past and our memories and I can't even put into words how much it means to the entire family. And I was taught everything about nature there. Had a very unusual mother for the time. She was a tomboy and she loved hunting, which at that point, back then, was probably like, started in the 30's, 40's, that was very unusual for women to hunt in those times. And she would go at great pains to show me when she was cleaning her squirrels and fish, show me all of the organs. So I was really immersed in that world because of that place, because we went there so often and had the ability to have this really almost a little private Shangri la there to enjoy as a family.

So we still go and we hope to go this year again, and so it's wonderful to be able to pass down those memories through the family, through all the generations and it's probably the most meaningful place to me. No matter the fantastic places I've been in Europe or in this country, it's still where I want to be the most.

So it's funny how you become imprinted on landscapes when you grow up and it never really leaves you.

AQ: It reminds a little bit of the pride of place and the connections to the land that do come up and surface in some of these dialogues when you have personal conversations about some of the people that grew up on the land...

LK: Absolutely. You know it's interesting. In the meetings that I organize, I always try to start the meetings with something where people tap into a memory of place.

And it's amazing how powerful it is. No matter where they live. The creek down the road, the lake around the corner - means so much to people... the lake cabin thing. These are very deeply seated things and on a very emotional basis and I think that's something that we haven't really tapped very well is the great emotion that goes with the love of nature and place.

And I think that is a huge motivator for people in making decisions. And it's something that in government we've been unwilling or haven't ventured into that area but I think, you know, when I ask my own colleagues why they chose the field they did, they talk often about a place where they grew up, a place they loved, a river or a lake. It's a great thing to access to help motivate people to become involved.

End.