

Victory would ultimately mean people could meander down any old road or trail and listen for scarlet tanagers, tree frogs, and even, rarely, catch a glimpse of a black bear.



Above: Top, SPARC protesting against fracking in Albany, 2011.

Bottom, SPARC President Sandra Kissam, at a recent SPARC bike tour at Stewart State Forest. COURTESY OF SPARC

the airport, and the eager local business community.

Victory would ultimately mean people could meander down any old road or trail and listen for scarlet tanagers, tree frogs, and even, rarely, catch a glimpse of a black bear. Instead of a China USA theme park, the public would have a forget-your-troubles place for all sorts of human pursuits beyond the harum-scarum busy world outside the forest.

Enter SPARC

Just as the Stewart Park and Reserve Coalition (SPARC) kept telling anyone who would listen, there would be room for all at Stewart State Forest. Except for developers.

How this forest stayed mostly whole and how that happened is a love story of those who rallied around the Kissams. Ben died early in the fight (in 1992), BUT his wife took over and guided the combatants through eighteen years of demonstrations, raucous public meetings, and court skirmishes—some lost but mostly won.

To preserve their beloved forest, she gathered together an unusual coalition of hunters, trappers, fishermen, nature buffs, and large environmental groups, including Sierra Club and some chapters of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

By 1999, Gov. Pataki thought he could settle the legal wrangling by SPARC by setting aside 5000 acres of Stewart State Forest as exempt from any kind of development.

That was a big deal to the local business faction. The governor took victory laps for having a green thumb. But SPARC said no deal. “We fought for the remaining 2000 acres,” says Kissam.

All Pataki wanted in return for “saving the forest,” he said, was a road through the eastern side of these airport buffer lands. No, said SPARC, pointing out that the road project included a hefty portion of development.

SPARC sealed the forest’s fate as a 7000-acre forest by finally winning in federal court—importantly, on the argument that the forest had always been parkland since the 1970s. Airport backers did get the road—which they hopefully dubbed route 747—but just a tiny corner of land around it is usable for development.

Persistence is how SPARC won, by pushing legal action, knowing that the clock was running out on Pataki’s time in office. A last-minute federal demand for study of the rare and endangered Indian bat cut the Pataki clock even more.

“Basically, we waited them out,” says Kissam. “We knew the Pataki administration was near its end and Pataki wanted to look like an environmentalist. There was also doubt whether there would be any state or federal highway funds still available.”

Forest Value

With this particular war won, SPARC is able to back up its pre-fight boast about the forest’s intrinsic value. For example, on a recent one-day SPARC bike tour, 277 riders showed up. Hikers can wonder at vast ponds created by beaver or lure great blue heron. The tallest hill, at 658 feet, is topped by a stand of thigh-high grasses reached through a haunting swamp mesmerizing by its resident thrushes’ flute-like songs.

Hunters cull everything from deer to rabbits. Trappers take good pelts, including muskrat and large weasels. Fishers get big bass. Other fascinating creatures roam this forest, like the rufous-vented tiger beetle, the pine elfin butterfly, and a bird with a tumbling call, the yellow-breasted chat, all rare in these parts.

Stewart is visited by thousands of people every year with all kinds of interests: horseback riders, hunters, fishers, trappers, snowmobilers, mountain bikers, hikers, bird watchers, and sporting dog trainers. Scientists, who found the rare purple milkweed during the legal struggle, visit too.

SPARC remains on full alert. For there’s a new threat: hydraulic fracking, specifically a blue blob on the state Department of Environmental Conservation’s Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement map that shows a potential source of natural gas under Stewart.

“That map is a red flag,” says Kissam.

Though Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s administration has said State Forests will be exempt, the devil’s always in the details, says Kissam. She points out that a July announcement of his decision also said he would permit underground fracking.

And maybe pipelines, trucks, and gas storage could be allowed in State Forests, Kissam worries. Typically, she’s hauling in every scrap of fracking news in her Town of Newburgh home. Kissam promises the same total war effort by SPARC that its members gave Stewart State Forest initially.

Allies

SPARC’s got old allies from the forest fight. Carmen Heitzman, past president of the 5000-member Orange County Federation of Sportsmen’s Clubs, says that group already has passed its own resolution against fracking. “We

don’t want them to do commercial mining, drilling (except for water), fracking, anything like that on this land. Period.”

“God bless Carmen,” says Kissam.

Gov. Cuomo should size up this coalition, because it’s not going to back down this time, either. After all, Kissam comes with the skills. As a special education teacher she used to redirect almost impenetrable handicaps. And she fell for Stewart once she saw it. “It was enchanting,” she says.

And there were memories of Ben fighting by her side. He hunted pheasants and was a key link to hunters in the SPARC fight.

Kissam herself was a child of nature. Still vivid are lessons she learned about birds from the drawings on the wall of her one-room elementary schoolhouse in Willow, Ulster County, close to imposing Overlook Mountain. Her teacher didn’t hobble kids when the recess bell clanged. “She let us out to explore,” Kissam still marvels.

She’s never stopped looking, wondering, and probing. Stewart, says SPARC lawyer and ADK member John Caffry, showed what Kissam was made of: “She was persistent, tenacious, and realistic, and really believed in what she was doing.” She also, he said, had the kind of backbone you need in a knock-down, drag-out fight. “It’s pretty much impossible to intimidate her,” says Caffry.



Wayne Hall spent twenty-six years as a beat reporter covering the environment and West Point for The Times Herald-Record in Middletown, N.Y. He is now a freelance writer in Cornwall-on-Hudson.



Trail in Stewart State Forest
Sharon Soons