



Environmental 'queen' works to protect Merrimack River

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Christine Tabak carries her Nalgene water bottle like a baby "has a binky." She's been using Tom's of Maine toothpaste for nearly 20 years, and when she introduces herself to children, the environmental engineer describes herself as a "dork." And in my dorkdom," she says. "I am queen."

Tabak, 33, a Connecticut native, is the executive director of the Merrimack River Watershed Council, based in Lowell.

For 32 years, the nonprofit group has been protecting the river and promoting the wise use of the watershed. The river is the drinking water source for more than 300,000 in the Merrimack Valley, including folks living in Lawrence, Methuen and Andover

What is the MWRC?

It's a silent force that's working hard not to be silent. Our mission is to protect the Merrimack River and promote the wise use of the watershed ... We are the voice of the Merrimack, and we really need support from the community.

You have degrees from University of Connecticut and Tufts University. Couldn't you be making a fortune in private industry?

I worked in consulting and made good money. But it was like drinking diet soda. It tasted OK going down but then it had a funny aftertaste. I'm a Gen-Xer. I grew up wanting to change the world ... I know I could be making much more money but I don't regret it at all.

What are some misconceptions about your group's work?

That while we'd like to meet all the needs in our communities, we simply cannot as a result of our funding. Another is that people think the river is clean. It's cleaner than it was ...

What's the best things folks can do for the river?

Take ownership of it. When you go to throw a plastic bottle in a barrel and you miss, go back and put it in. Realize that bottle will ultimately end up somewhere it's not supposed to be.

The MWRC does all kinds of water quality testing and monitoring. What kinds of fun stuff do you do?

We have over 30 paddling trips per year. They are free and BYOB – bring your own boat! We try to

coordinate with other groups and do a variety of fund stuff. The trips are listed on our Web site, www.merrimack.org.

You've used natural toothpaste since you were 14. In what other ways is your life environmentally friendly?

I try not to commute to the office more than three days per week, and I use public transportation as much as possible. I make the best of my time and energy resources.

I am also an energy freak. For a long time, I had no digital camera, no personal laptop and no GPS unit. I finally gave up and bought an iPhone because it had everything in it.

I also held out for a long time before I bought a microwave.

Do your hobbies involve the environment?

I rock climb, backpack, hike and occasionally paddle. I roller blade and sail. I have also been a teen mentor for the past 10 years. I am really passionate about the next generation.

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