My mentor: Dr. Jane Disney

By Jordan Bailey | Aug 07, 2014

Shortly after I graduated college, I was living in Bar Harbor where I was working at a restaurant and rediscovering a lot of healthy outdoor activities. I had spent so much of my time prior to that poring over books on philosophy, while working on my thesis, that I wanted nothing more to do with the subject.

I developed an interest in stories about sailing to the Arctic and read the book, "The Riddle of the Ice" by Myron Arms, but instead of a sailing adventure, it chronicled the author's slow discovery that human activity was affecting the global climate. I had known vaguely about pollution being a problem, but it hadn't hit me until that point how seriously we were affecting the environment.

I was horrified! I wanted to do something! I was hoping to find a group that was working on the problem and join it. I heard a couple of women on the local radio station talking about a storm-drain stenciling project they were doing with school children through their nonprofit organization, the Mount Desert Island Water Quality Coalition (MDIWQC). They would paint stencils of a fish and the words "Dump no Waste, Drains to Bay" next to storm water drains in the road.

This was exactly what I was looking for. Immediately I contacted them and asked to volunteer. That's when I met Jane, or Dr. Disney.

Jane had been a high school biology teacher but quit her job after she and her students won the citizen science category and the grand prize award from a Seaworld Busch Gardens environmental contest for a total of $27,500. They used the award money to begin a nonprofit that identified and worked to resolve water quality issues on Mount Desert Island.

I started out entering data into a spreadsheet on a computer in a one-room apartment in Town Hill. I wasn't even certain what the data was at the time, but as I carefully copied numbers from datasheets into the tiny squares in Excel, I was happy to be doing my small part to fight environmental degradation.

Soon I was able to move up in the organization after Jane received a grant that allowed her to hire me as the organization's web designer and education assistant. That was when my learning began.

Over that first year I learned how to conduct a watershed survey, collect phytoplankton and identify red-tide organisms under the microscope, monitor water quality parameters such as salinity, turbidity and dissolved oxygen, and, using equipment at the Mount Desert Island Bio Lab, test for fecal coliform bacteria in streams and seawater. For every project we undertook to deal with a water quality issue, we would involve students and community volunteers for an educational component.

All the while, no matter how busy we were and how hard we were all working, Jane would always remind us to take time for hiking, biking, skiing, skating or yoga.
In the summer of 2002, Jane and I would spend afternoons in the office, now occupying half a house in Town Hill. We conceived a grander education plan that eventually would become the Maine Coast Learning Expedition. This was an expeditionary learning program for high school students to spend a semester immersed in the work of MDIWQC, while teachers on our staff tied the work to such school subjects as English, math, social studies, biology, environmental studies and botany.

I remember those days in the bright, airy upstairs room as some of the most inspiring of my working life. We would spend hours talking about the philosophy of education, service learning, and the writings of Ted Sizer and Kurt Hahn (founder of Outward Bound). We worked on developing a curriculum that we hoped would make students feel that they were doing meaningful, purposeful work, and that their ideas were valuable.

That was when I really got to know Jane and how broad her vision was. In that time we also developed a relationship where she would talk about her out-of-the-box, wide-reaching ideas, and they would plant seeds in my mind that would grow into writing projects.

It was difficult at first to convince superintendents to allow students to get credit through our programs — at the time they were convinced that colleges wanted to see only that students were "maxing out" on the available AP classes offered at their high schools.

Nevertheless, the program did do well and got enough students to last for several semesters. It is nice to see that now, a decade later, expeditionary learning is becoming common in public schools.

About a year later, I moved to another state with my fiance. I often looked back at that as a big mistake when he became my ex-fiance and I was working jobs that were not nearly as creative as the one I had at MDIWQC. On the other hand, they were perhaps more stable because they weren't dependent on small grants.

As it turned out, the organization did close its doors a couple of years later because of lack of funding. But eventually, in 2010, I made my way back to Bar Harbor and connected with Jane again.

She was working as a staff scientist at the Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory, directing the Community Environmental Health Lab, which was carrying on many of the projects of the former Water Quality Coalition — swim-beach, red-tide, water-quality and cruise-ship monitoring, to name a few — and all of these projects involved students and volunteers in the work.

But the major project of the lab was restoring eelgrass, an important fish habitat that also benefits water quality and absorbs carbon. Jane met with me to talk about her current projects and gave me things to read about eelgrass. It was as though that several-year hiatus hadn't happened. I felt like I was back in that office in Town Hill, my mind spinning with ideas for how I could contribute.

I was hired by the lab and coordinated the "Seagrasses in Classes" program for three years, during which time I delivered classroom lessons, led field trips and wrote a curriculum handbook based on the activities Jane was doing with students, using aquaria of eelgrass, as well as some I developed.

It was wonderful to see how many students were still drawing inspiration from Jane and discovering that they could contribute valuable work to science.
Each spring, all the students from the various participating schools would come together to share their work and participate in bay-planning activities modeled on similar conservation planning work being done by adults in groups such as one Jane also founded, the Frenchman Bay Partners.

This was similar to the student watershed forums she convened while adult watershed forums and conferences were occurring back in our Water Quality Coalition days. Involving students in planning was Jane's signature element in her education programs.

Over the last couple of years, as I watched Jane's career evolve and so many students and volunteers find their confidence in doing science and their voices by participating in planning activities through her programs, I started to see everything that was happening around me as stories I wanted to write.

A famous scientist in his late 80s, for example, would visit and try to persuade us to put cement fertilizer balls all over the bay to help eelgrass grow far beyond its historic limits. If every acre where eelgrass could grow were to produce a ton of fish, he would say, "Maine would be rich beyond imagination."

And then there was the time Jane had all the mussel draggers in Frenchman Bay over for dinner to ask them not to drag in areas where she and partners were planting eelgrass. She showed them pictures taken through a microscope of eelgrass covered with juvenile mussels clinging to the blades, as they do at that stage of their lives to feed on plankton. By the end of the evening, the draggers agreed to stay out of the restored eelgrass and were pointing out other areas on the map they thought would be great places to plant more.

So many stories to tell! I realized it was time to move on to the career that I had wanted all along: reporting.

This Friday is Jane's birthday, Aug. 8. I'm sure all of her former students and volunteers who were influenced by her remember this, because 8/8 was how she reminded us how many drops of manganous sulfate, potassium iodide and sodium thiosulfate we were supposed to add to our water samples to test for dissolved oxygen.

I'm sure we all also remember what a strong role she has played in encouraging each of us to find our talents, and how through her energy and creativity she inspired us to accomplish more than we ever thought we could.