

A tirelessly fighting son of the Patuxent

Riverkeeper Fred Tutman empowers communities and takes on polluters



Fred Tutman founded the Patuxent Riverkeeper 2004. He is one of the longest serving waterkeepers in the Chesapeake region and is currently the only black waterkeeper in the country. (Photo courtesy Fred Tutman)

by Joan Smedinghoff

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Although he was born in Washington, D.C., and raised all over the world, Fred Tutman considers his roots “all Maryland.” The ancestral family tobacco farm, founded by his maternal great grandfather, was just a stone’s throw away from the water at the center of his life: the Patuxent River.

Now the Patuxent Riverkeeper, it is Tutman’s job to speak for the river and its people. We wanted to hear more from Tutman about his work, its challenges and what keeps him going. The following is a lightly edited and condensed version of his responses to our questions.

How did you get involved in the environmental field?

As a rural dweller I was raised to “keep it country” in the little hamlet where my family is from. We grew up fending off housing developments, urbanization and gentrification, especially when you consider the rampant sprawl near D.C., Baltimore and Annapolis. From an early age I marched in picket lines, testified at zoning hearings and organized the neighbors—long before I ever heard of a riverkeeper.

After a long career in television and multimedia, I learned about the Waterkeepers movement while studying law at University of the District of Columbia. It was the first time it occurred to

me that one could have a career fighting for the environment and taking up the cause of neighborhood empowerment. With years of thinking on my feet and living by my wits as a contractor, plus some legal training and a history of being a community advocate, I knew riverkeeping had my name on it.

What has been your biggest challenge?

I think I have bridled anytime someone tried to relegate my own personal narrative to that of “diversity.” I feel like diversity is a label applied when expectations of leadership are low and nonprofit movements want to take credit for being inclusive—the role of people of color is carefully scripted [by others] to support the expectations put on us, we can stand our own two feet and chart our own course. I think this is seen as an impertinence by those who feel the conservation work of people of color must necessarily tell the story of any and everybody—except ourselves.

I think a black riverkeeper, almost by definition, must become a different kind of riverkeeper. I have personally triumphed by persisting in doing useful, meaningful and influential work as much as folks keep trying to drag us instead into fairly Pollyanna cause work like trash cleanups, tree plantings and running school trips.

I think our reputation at Patuxent Riverkeeper is known for speaking truth to power, not flinching at tough fights, some spectacular legal wins from time to time, and remaining autonomous from greenwashing and other busy-work that often passes for acceptable environmental works. Actually, I think our work is truly transformative in that we often litigate and challenge systemic water quality problems at their root.

What are you most proud of?

I am proud at how truly inclusive our board, our membership and our program work has become. I feel we have practiced what many other organizations have only talked about. The variety in age, gender, ethnicity, faith and more is extraordinary in grassroots organizations like ours, organically governed by our members instead of by the richest and most exclusive donors we could find.

I am also quite proud of the measurable spoils of our work that have pumped some 650 million dollars back into public treasuries from the polluting communities. This is far and beyond what any of us is likely to find a foundation grant for. Suing polluters for reparations fines, penalties and remediation funds changes the ante considerably for citizen leverage. Suddenly we are not begging for alms to buy trash bags or get corporate handouts, but rather pursuing substantial stakes that truly deter violations of environmental laws. We actually change polluter behavior through our advocacy.

I am really proud that we have prevailed against considerable covert opposition—even within the conservation community, where we are sometimes seen as non-team players and off message. We are small by intention, and we anchor our work inherently with the threat of enforcement as our main focus. It’s a movement that rejects accepting money from polluters and measures success in terms of shifting the playing field toward a bigger voice for everyday citizens in the affairs that shape the future of the waterway.

What inspires you?

The Senior Bay Scientists and Policymakers is a group of retired legislators, scientists and policy workers who have adopted a long view to protect natural resources in our state. I admire greatly these stalwart elders who are very willing to mentor others, share their knowledge and wisdom, and stand with us on the gridirons to keep the work “real” and uncompromising.

The late Senator Joe Tidings was one of my heroes. [Bernie Fowler](#) is heroic. Former state Senator Gerald Winegrad continues to do bold and quite heroic work, albeit unsung. These are folks with vast knowledge of the history of the Bay movement, but they also have context for dissent and how to marshal citizen power towards a vital cause.

I am also inspired by rank-and-file citizens who use their own money, time and dedication to fight for what they love and believe in. I am always inspired by, and take power from, brave citizen advocates.

What does the Patuxent River mean to you?

I am a son of the Patuxent River, like many of my ancestors before me. The river speaks to me on a fundamental level that soothes, inspires and sustains my spirit. I love being around and serving the people and communities who are in tune with this river’s endless and timeless deep rhythms. One could spend several lifetimes struggling with the problems of this river, but I am honored to spend what time I have left in life doing what I can for a marvelous watercourse that has in the past offered, and continues to offer, so much value to Marylanders.

Learn more about Fred Tutman and his work on the [Patuxent Riverkeeper website](#).