Quality and the Quest

Champions fight the good fight in quest for trails
By Robert Searns, Vice Chair, American Trails Board of Directors

Every two years, American Trails has the privilege, honor, and yes, the chore to review outstanding projects that further our common mission: the creation of a national infrastructure of QUALITY trails and greenways—accessible to all Americans—that offer places of solace, health, fitness, conservation, recreation, and transportation.

This year we reviewed many outstanding submittals and this past fall, at the 2004 National Trails Symposium in Austin, Texas, we recognized those individuals and projects that, in the opinion of the selection committee, excelled.

Indeed, all of the submittals we received were impressive, and it was difficult to choose those who received special recognition with an American Trails award. Having to narrow the field of the submittals in the selection process was the chore part—difficult to let any of them go.

The awards process got me thinking about the commonalities of successful trail endeavors. What can we learn—not only from what the winners have accomplished—but also from these and many other successes? Here are a few considerations:

You need a Champion
Most champions share common characteristics, Lance Armstrong, Muhammad Ali, the Williams Sisters, the Red Sox, even the “Biggest Loser” of The Apprentice “reality” TV show. They all have a vision, they all have a goal, they stay focused, they believe in themselves (“I am the greatest!”) and, yes, they have talent. Don’t let the talent part intimidate you because each of us indeed has a talent, though for some it remains permanently hidden.

For others the quest, the challenge or the adversity brings out the talent. Once a champion finds his goal, he or she is undaunted. Henry Ford put it this way: “if you think you can, if you think you can’t…you’re right!”

Ann Lusk was a champion when she pushed for a bike/pedestrian trail near Stowe, VT. At the time such a thing was virtually unheard of. Now it’s a must-have for any ski resort community. Trail activity now equals or exceeds ski activity in many resort areas. Developers of new communities are following the same trend—going beyond just providing the golf course.

Missouri Congresswoman Karen McCarthy was a champion when she fought for and succeeded in helping to get the Katy Trail built across Missouri, the nation’s grandest rail trail and the prototype for a national system of trails and greenways. The East Coast Greenway, the Continental Divide Trail, and the Pacific Crest Trail receive inspiration from Missouri’s accomplishment.

Texas Congressman Lloyd Doggett has been a champion with his unflappable commitment to trails and support of the Transportation Enhancement Program nationally and his support for making Austin a leader in trails.

Peter Axelson is a champion as he breaks new ground each day in the technology of making outdoor recreation accessible to everyone, including people in wheelchairs and with other challenges.

Dave and Phebe Novic are champions. They envision a worldwide network of long distance walking trails crossing nations and continents modeled after the European system where you can walk from village to village, then stay in a local inn and eat and drink with impunity because all the calories have been burned walking 15 or so miles that day.

In a small town near Denver, Lew Steighorst was a champion. At age 75, he decided to take another look at the creek through town. For many decades the creek was inaccessible, tightly confined by the backs of gas stations, dumpsters, and other obstructions. The biggest impediment, though, was the anxiety and animosity of some of its residents. There were feuds in the town—some between folks in their 70s and 80s that had been going on since high school. It was often hard to reach agreements and to get things accomplished—let alone build a new trail and greenway through the heart of town.
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Sincerely,

Walter C. May
Taking the vision and making it real:

Lew had a vision, though— of a trail along the creek—a seemingly impossible task given both the physical and political obstacles. He set his sights, helped secure more than $2 million in outside grants, helped negotiate rights-of-way from skeptical land owners, and now the trail is nearly complete all the way through town. Thousands bicycle and stroll along the cleaned-up and beautified corridor. Lew has since passed, but his legacy remains.

These are but a few examples. There are many other champions out there across America. The point is that they, and you, share these commonalities of vision and mission.

Just Put Some Paxil in Their Water (Compulsive Behavior vs. A Quest)

One important quality of trail and greenway champions is their sense of the quest. Successful trail champions are persistent and they persevere. It is also interesting to note that the notion of the quest is inherent in every trail experience. Trails and greenways lead to a destination—a pathway to something. More importantly, it is choosing a route and following it through a series of experiences and sometimes a gauntlet of challenges to its destination—all the while taking pleasure in the process.

Bottom line: there may be many paths to your goal. The key is not to lose sight of the vision and then not be deterred, discouraged, or intimidated. To quote Mick Jagger: “Don’t you panic, don’t you panic. Give it one more try! Just keep on trying.” Put another way, the journey is better than the arrival anyway, so stay the course. Trail champions and trail users understand this.

I was at a dinner party once and a woman asked me what I did for a living. Not having a label like salesman, lawyer, or doctor, I told her that I “do” greenways and trails. “Oh,” she said, “so you are a landscape architect.” “No, but I work with them.” “So, you are an engineer.” “Well no, but I work with them too.” Not having formal training in these areas, it was difficult to explain what I do.

As I struggled to explain, she cut in and said “Oh, you are a ‘pathologist!’” “Perfect!” I thought, though I might get in trouble with the State Medical Board for using that moniker on my resume. But the point is that we are all “pathologists.” We are trying to find the most logical—and righteous—ways to build pathways.

Visualize and Wag the Dog

The vision is everything. Successful trail champions always have a vision. They might wake up with it one morning. Maybe, think it up while walking on a trail. Sometimes it springs forth from adversity or thinking through how to address a community problem. Often the source is all of these.

But the vision is the genesis—but only the start. The next step is to make the vision comprehensible and communicate that vision to others so you can build a constituency and garner support.
Champions never accept that it can’t be done
They are willing enough, creative enough, and sometimes crazy enough, to pursue the concept even though it may mean a total paradigm shift for the larger community. Don’t be afraid to “wag the dog.” Don’t let anyone tell you it can’t work or it can’t be done if you logically believe it can be.

Littleton’s Platte River Floodplain Park, now a major element in Denver’s 450-mile trail and greenway system, is a perfect example. In 1968, Army Corps of Engineers wanted to channelize the Platte River upstream of Denver in a hard, unnatural trapezoidal channel to convey floodwater. The folks in Littleton said “Why not take the money you would use to channelize and just buy and preserve the natural floodplain?” The Corps said we don’t have a provision for this. The developers said we would lose valuable development land. It was 1968 and folks just didn’t do that sort of thing. The champions in Littleton were undaunted. They made a “federal case of it.” They contacted their congressional delegation and an Act of Congress was passed requiring the Corps to consider the “non-structural” alternative, changing the way things are now done nationwide, and getting them their floodplain park.

Is it Righteous?
Righteousness is another quality of successful champions. These are people who also have in mind the community good—especially those who donate their time and their energy and who go out on a limb to do the right thing. The righteousness test asks if the trail will better a community— not adversely impact wildlife or neighborhoods or business. The question a righteous trail champion asks is: “Did we leave it better than we found it?”

Place a bet on 00 Green! Luck vs. Serendipity
Finally, here is a quality that may lie beyond what a trail champion can control—serendipity, or maybe just dumb luck. Currently, I am working with two colleagues—Chuck Flink (former American Trails Chairman) and Jack Zunino (a talented Las Vegas landscape architect) on an open space and trails plan for Las Vegas. We call the vision Vias Verdes—a scenic beltway and trail loop around the city with spokes into the neighborhoods. It reflects the ideas and visions we heard from the trail and open space champions in Las Vegas who wanted to build a quality of life and special character for the city. Hopefully they will succeed in their quest to create a legacy for that fast growing community so it will emerge as one of North America’s great cities.

At night, after the planning work is done in Las Vegas, I sometimes play poker. It’s relaxing and I get to hang out with some of the locals and old timers who come in to play. The bets are small, so it’s a friendly game and the local players are not shy about telling you that you did something stupid when you bet a hand wrong. Point is, that if you play the cards you are dealt right, you can survive and even prevail.

This seems to be true in trail and greenway endeavors. If you have an exciting vision, a logical plan of action, a quality, righteous project, the Karmic forces seem to often—not always, but often—come together to make it happen. The forces converge and the project happens. I’ve seen this occur over and over again. And unlike Texas Hold’em, it is more than a lucky streak—it is a project well done!