

TWO WOMEN: A SHARED PASSION FOR THE RIVER



KAREN CRAGOLIN

Asheville and Western North Carolina have produced some extraordinary people. Two women I have been privileged to know—Wilma Dykeman and Marjorie Maxwell—were born here and would have been considered extraordinary regardless of their birthplace. Had they been born in New York City or Paris they would have distinguished themselves and been known for their accomplishments. Both of these incredible women have since passed, but their legacies live on.

she sure had a special way with words. She could articulate the most complex human thoughts, needs, and emotions. Her wisdom and humor were repeated and cherished by the thousands of folks who knew her.

Neither woman ever met a stranger. Both loved to teach. Each was generous with her knowledge but kind in her delivery of it, never wishing to make the listener feel inadequate. Wilma taught at Berea College and The University of Knoxville. Marjorie taught at the Isaac Dickson School, The Basilica at Saint Lawrence Catholic Church, and at RiverLink. Marjorie loved teaching children to read. She knew that every child deserves a good education and she volunteered her time to make sure all the students at Isaac Dickson had extra help learning to read if they needed it. At the church Marjorie taught children to read their prayers and bible stories. But she always snuck in a story about the river too. Marjorie loved to teach adults—especially about the river. She always said that “the condition of the river is a reflection of the condition of the community.”

Both women extracted and shared universal truths from their childhood experiences. Wilma used her observations to write books. Marjorie used and shared her observations to help make her community a better place.

Both women loved to be busy and involved. They both loved to laugh and had smiles that would light up the room. They had quick wits and were “ladies” in the very best and truest sense of the word.

Yes, Asheville is a special place, populated with very special people. These wise women left all of us who were fortunate enough to know them with an enduring legacy and so many wonderful memories. Thank you, ladies, for living life to the fullest and for leaving behind so many examples of how to live a rich and full life. Thank you for discovering the French Broad, for loving it, and for sharing your insights about rivers and life with the rest of us.

Karen Cragolin is the executive director of RiverLink, a nonprofit organization spearheading the economic and environmental revitalization of the French Broad River and its tributaries as a place to work, live, and play. For information, visit riverlink.org or call 252.8474, ext. 110.



Marjorie Maxwell at “Fall in Love” with the French Broad Cabaret

One was born off of Beaverdam Road and the other was born on Bartlett Street just above the railroad tracks and old Passenger Depot Station near the French Broad River. One was black, one was white. They both loved the river, and they both worked very hard to make the waterway better for all of us.

Wilma Dykeman (who passed in 2007) wrote *The French Broad* in 1955 and it’s never been out of print. In the book, she describes how Western North Carolina’s economy is dependent upon its environment. She explains the importance of the river to our past and to our future. She made us aware and challenged us to be better river caretakers for our own survival. Wilma wrote 18 books in her lifetime and influenced millions of readers through her insights and knowledge.

Marjorie Maxwell (who passed in July of 2009) was a RiverLink board member for 12 years. Marjorie didn’t write books, but



Wilma Dykeman in her library