



Trailblazers

The Eastern Shore is on the right path thanks to a trail blazed two decades ago.

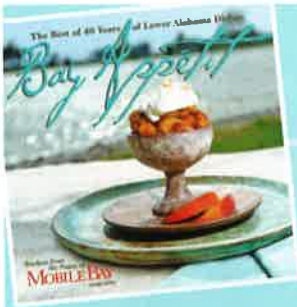
text by CATHERINE DORROUGH • *photos by* MATTHEW COUGHLIN

The Eastern Shore Trail begins where the Bayway touches down in Daphne, sloping under the interstate toward the reptilian waterscape of Gator Boardwalk. Underneath the rushing roar of traffic, the natural world sits placidly, waiting to whisk the curious off along a 22-mile path that cuts through towns, meanders down scenic tree-lined streets and breezes alongside the Bay.

The Baldwin County Trailblazers began building this trail piece by piece more than 20 years ago, led

by founder Teko Wiseman. “At the very beginning, it was a mass movement,” says Wiseman’s daughter, Valery Smith, herself a past president of the Trailblazers. “Nobody was riding bicycles, nobody was walking. It was a totally different world than what is developing now.

“When I grew up, Mama and Daddy used to rent a house down the Bay around Bailey’s Creek. Daddy and I would jog every Saturday because he had heart problems. We were always jogging when I was a teenager, everywhere we went, because of



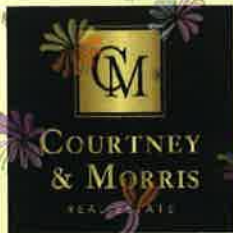
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Daddy's heart. And we had to jog in the weeds along the side of the road ... If the highway department didn't happen to come by within a week and cut the side of the road, it was up like that," she says, gesturing to her knee.

Smith describes her mother as a driving force in the early heyday of the Trailblazers. "She worked 60 hours a week on it. She was full-time, unpaid, that's all she did." Wiseman wrote grants, raised funds, coordinated with the Baldwin County Highway Department as well as the cities of Daphne and Fairhope and drummed up community support to bring her vision to life over a span of decades. Upon her passing in 2011 at the age of 83, the Mobile Press-Register described her as "one of the best-known figures in civic betterment in the Mobile area for nearly a half-century."

"MY HABIT OF STAYING ACTIVE MEANS MY OPTIONS IN LIFE ARE MULTIPLIED: I'M STRONG ENOUGH AND HEALTHY ENOUGH TO PLAY SPORTS, CLIMB MOUNTAINS TO GORGEOUS VISTAS AND KEEP UP WITH MY KIDS. IT FEELS GOOD."

— Nancy Johnson

Natural Respite

As the Eastern Shore Trail begins its southward journey, it whizzes through Lake Forest, dashes across U.S. Highway 98, then slows down to soak up the view along Scenic 98 on its approach to Olde Towne Daphne. After a bustling interlude through old Daphne's main corridor, the trees arc overhead in a protective cocoon, traffic grows more intermittent, and the landscape begins to wind and roll through Montrose.

“There’s a meditative quality to walking and biking because you get into a rhythm,” says Trailblazers board member Nancy Johnson. “In any community, you are so much more integrated into your surroundings when you’re not in a vehicle. All your senses are so much more exposed to the life and sights of your surroundings.”

From there, the trail follows Scenic 98 into the heart of Fairhope, then cuts west along Fairhope Avenue and rejoins Scenic as it jogs south again to parallel the Bay. This is where, if you catch it at just the right moment in the late afternoon, the sun casts a rim of molten gold around the edges of the Spanish moss that wisps from the trees, the horizon begins to blush and a warm glow rises from the Bay as one of the Eastern Shore’s famous sunsets begins.

Half a mile to the east, another Trailblazers initiative takes place like clockwork early each morning. Students, parents and teachers from Fairhope Elementary School and Fairhope Intermediate School gather at designated meeting spots for the Walking School Bus, making the half-mile trek to their respective schools in two groups. Trailblazer board member Charlene Lee founded the group in 2013. It has grown now to the point where on a fine day, more than 100 children will participate.

Lee credits collaboration with the schools and the participation of teachers — some of whom have walked since day one — for enabling the program to thrive.

“I thought ultimately what I wanted to do was help establish a daily pattern where walking to school was just a normal thing you did,” Lee explains. “It affects health, and it affects kids getting to school ready to learn.

“I love the joy I see between the parents and the kids, and the fact that it is actually a community that walks to school every day — for the majority of people, regardless of the weather. It’s become its own living creature. I never dreamed that so many parents and grandparents would walk.”

Informative Route

Back along the Eastern Shore Trail, the path flattens out and drifts closer to sea level as it cuts through Point Clear on its way to the Grand Hotel. Its southward trek continues past the resort until it veers back east to rejoin U.S. Highway 98. Those who trek across the finish line are rewarded with a postcard-perfect view of the shore, a reward that begs to be savored.

Though this is the end of the trail, the



Opening portrait

From left to right, Carol Stickney, Nancy Johnson and Charlene Lee enjoy a brisk morning walk along Scenic 98.

This page, top to bottom

The Eastern Shore Trail isn’t just for walkers. Bicyclists like Bill Beck and Dan Bourbon can also take advantage of the 22-mile path. Molly Spain enjoys running along the route with her son, Jack. For Charlene Lee, Nancy Johnson and Carol Stickney, exercising is certainly more fun with friends.

Trailblazers' work continues. If anything, it only seems to be gearing up.

"For a long time, we couldn't find the energy that my mother had," Smith says. "The Trailblazers have gone through a huge reawakening and reimagining in the past year or so, with new vibrant board members, younger visions, more energy."

For months now, the Trailblazers have been working to enhance the experience along the Eastern Shore Trail by updating the informational kiosks that dot the route.

"If you're not from around here, riding through Daphne, and you want to get to the Bay, you need to know that if you take a right on this street you will end up at Mayday Park," Smith says. With help from Thompson Engineering and Watershed, the group has been creating custom maps for each kiosk, detailing the various sections of trail.

The Trailblazers plan to use each kiosk to advertise cyclist-friendly businesses. "You can buy little medallions to name your own businesses if you're interested in bringing cyclists to them," Johnson says.

Off the trail, the group is further promoting cycling by installing bike racks around Fairhope, as well as offering bicycle valet service at the Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival, Earth Day Mobile Bay and Alabama Coastal BirdFest.

Trails Take Off

The founding ethos of trail-building lives on in the group.

"Walkable, bikeable communities are absolutely where people are going," Johnson says. "It makes a community sellable, it impacts property values. Especially the younger generation, this is what they're wanting. We have 14 municipalities in Baldwin County, and all of them are building out trails — all of them. Because this is what citizens are looking for."

The Trailblazers have gotten behind a larger initiative to build a Rails to

Trails pathway from Foley to Bay Minette. Rails to Trails projects convert old railroad trailbeds to cyclist and pedestrian pathways.

"Where there's Rails to Trails, you end up with a street-wide highway corridor for cyclists. And so little towns open up — little bakeries, bike shops — it creates its own little culture," Smith says.

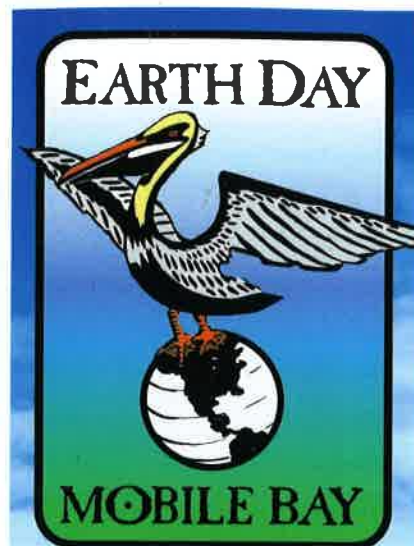
"It's an economic generator," Johnson contributes.

This Rails to Trails project is still in its infancy, with hurdles to overcome (not the least of which is that some of the proposed trail route crosses private land). However, the Trailblazers have been meeting with Baldwin County's city planners and highway department to develop a master plan to create cyclist-friendly corridors between towns, including what it could look like to connect the Eastern Shore Trail to an eventual Rails to Trails route.

"Development occurs," Johnson says. "They do constant maintenance and upgrading of the streets. There's protocol and a schedule every year for roads to be improved. You have to keep up with that. So if we decide that Highway 54 is the way to connect, and they're paving it this year, it might be 10 years before we ever get back to it. Now's the time to figure out how to get that connectivity."

"Back when Mama started this, all of these cities were not writing transportation grants," Smith continues. "Nobody was. Mama wrote them. Now, the cities have their own grant writers. And all of these cities, especially in the south of the county, have urban planners who are trying to figure out how to move people in ways that are fun and not just in a vehicle.

"Really just in the past few years, the talk has been: How do we connect? How do we get from Fairhope to Loxley? How do we get from Loxley to Silverhill? How do we get from Spanish Fort to Daphne, on a bicycle?" **MB**



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