Keeping A Promise

In a career full of challenges, Margaret Spontak may be facing her biggest one yet—trying to restore the once-iconic Ocklawaha River in honor of her brother.

BY RICHARD ANGUIANO

Over decades, Margaret Spontak has built a career of accomplishments in the Ocala Metro and beyond in a variety of disciplines: communications, business development, education, and environmental conservation.

At 69, the Ocala native is busy with her most ambitious effort yet as president of the Great Florida Riverway Trust, a nonprofit political organization that advocates restoring the natural flow of the Ocklawaha River. The Kirkpatrick Dam, built in 1968 at the northern edge of the Ocala National Forest as part of the soon-to-be abandoned federal Cross Florida Barge Canal project, stopped the Ocklawaha's natural course and created the 9,500-acre Rodman Reservoir.

Tammy Griffin

SPONTAK'S GROUP SEEMED ON THE VERGE of victory earlier this year, when after its lobbying, the Florida Legislature approved $6.25 million to begin restoration of the Ocklawaha with a 10-year deadline for the project. In late June, however, Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed the funding.

Spontak appears philosophical when discussing the setback.

"The Governor's staff said that this issue warranted a bill rather than an appropriation," Spontak says, "which allows for more public discussion."

Then again, persisting—through professional adversity as well as personal loss—has been a hallmark of Spontak's career. She explains that her advocacy for restoring the Ocklawaha began as a promise to John Hankinson Jr., a beloved older brother, as he was dying.

"Somewhere," Spontak remembers, "I have a letter he wrote to the governor in his senior year of high school about stopping the Cross Florida Barge Canal. That's how far back he was involved in it. He was kind of my hero growing up."

John Hankinson Jr. would grow up to pursue a career in water and land conservation, culminating with his appointment as regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta in 1994. After he died in March 2017 at 69, his obituary in the *Tallahassee Democrat* noted, "His desire to restore the Ocklawaha River to be a free-flowing system continued to be a passion."

Spontak recalls that not long before her brother's death, after a stroke left him unable to speak, she heard

Alan Youngblood

from her son, Michael Spontak.

"My son is an environmental scientist and he said, 'Mom, I've been doing work for Uncle Johnny. It has to do with the Rodman Dam, and he's been working with some businesspeople, trying to figure out a solution everyone would agree on out there," Spontak says. "He goes, 'I don't know who he's been working with or anything.'"

Spontak says she made a promise to her brother on the day he died.

"I said, 'I don't know what you've done, but I will try to follow through on whatever you've been working on," she says.

SPONTAK, BORN MARGARET HANKINSON, says she grew up in a "conservation-minded" family, albeit of differing political stripes. She graduated from Florida State University with a bachelor's degree in communications in 1977. She would later earn a master of business administration degree from Nova Southeastern University.

Her career includes conservation-related roles as director of development for Audubon Florida, director of policy and planning at the St. Johns River Water Management District, and a driving force behind the successful "Pennies for Parks" bond referendum in Marion County in 1988 that secured $20 million for land conservation.

Spontak also held leadership positions in the education sector, including executive director of Discovery Science Center; executive director of corporate training and continuing education at what is now College of Central Florida; assistant director of the University of Florida Leadership Development Institute; and director of education of Master the Possibilities, a continuing education program at On Top of the World.

Most of the jobs listed on Spontak's resume show spans of three or four years. She says that's no accident.

"I love going in," she explains, "and helping people transition, change management, do good things."

Jaye Baillie, also with an extensive leadership career in Marion County and currently the executive director of Marion Cultural Alliance downtown, says she has been friends with Spontak since their high school days in Ocala, adding Shirley Hankinson, Spontak's mother, taught her algebra at Osceola Middle School.

"Margaret is a remarkable community leader and a wonderful friend," says Baillie. "She always thinks of how she can help others and she does it with such joy."

Baillie also describes Spontak as "a remarkable convener and strategic thinker," adding that her "calm demeanor and excellent communication skills create a comfortable environment for Margaret to engage others."

"I love helping people do good things."
—Margaret Spontak

Spontak's stint as senior vice president for business development for Workforce Connection, now known as CareerSource CLM, from 2007 to 2010, put such attributes to a supreme test. It was a momentous era for business in Marion County—for mostly wrong reasons.

Spontak recalls taking the Workforce role to help new and incoming businesses get training, materials and

services. Her resume entry notes the awarding of a $2.9 million Department of Labor grant for "green jobs" training in West Ocala, one of five grants she acquired and managed.

But it wasn't long, she says, before her priorities "flipped totally."

In October 2008, Merillat, a manufacturer of cabinets, laid off 279 workers, before shuttering the plant in January 2009. In August 2009, after a federal raid, Taylor, Bean & Whitaker, a leading U.S. wholesale mortgage lender headquartered in Ocala, stopped business operations, costing 2,000 employees their jobs and sending the firm's majority owner to prison for securities, bank and wire fraud, and conspiracy to commit fraud.

Spontak recalls her office being transformed into a "war room" and her focus shifting to getting help for displaced workers.

"It was very emotional for people," she says. "I had a guy come up who found out he had cancer and now he had no health care. A lady was nine months pregnant with no health care. Another lady was crying because she didn't ever want to take government services. I had to convince her it was okay, that she had been paying for those services.

The Great Florida Riverway Trust's three-part plan will have a net economic benefit of $198 million over 20 years.

"We brought in companies that were hiring, which wasn't a huge amount," Spontak adds. "We had people that could get food stamps. There were doctors that did some pro bono work, and we were trying to hook up the lady who was nine months pregnant with an [obstetrician] who would take over. People were crying because they realized that so many people cared."

Alan Youngblood

IN MORE RECENT YEARS, Spontak herself has coped with a string of personal losses. A year and a half after her brother, John Hankinson Jr. died, Spontak lost her mother.

After her mother's death, Spontak had a talk with her husband, Vince, who retired from a career as co-owner of Toffaletti Hardware in Ocala. At the time, Spontak was working in philanthropy for Duke Energy in St. Petersburg.

"I was working a ton of hours," she recalls. "I said, 'Mom left us a little bit of money and I'd like to retire two years early and do this.'"

"This" was the effort that eventually became the Great Florida Riverway Trust.

"I was surprised when Vince said, 'Yeah, that's fine.' And I'm thinking, 'You know, I've got a chance to maybe do something—one big thing—that can make a huge difference to this whole region, not just Marion County, but 12 counties, in fact.'"

Sadly, the biggest shock lay ahead.

In September 2021, Vince "dropped dead suddenly" while hunting on an aunt's property in Ohio, Spontak says. He was 66. The couple had been married 39 years.

"His brother went up to her farm every year to hunt, but Vince never went," Spontak recalls. "That year, I told him, 'You need to do this.' Anyway, he had heart issues."

Spontak says she and her husband had been open about discussing death and dying.

"Before he died, we were saying, 'Yeah, we're not going to be good at being really old people,' she says with a laugh. "So when he died, it was kind of like, 'Darn you!'"

According to Spontak, she resumed her Ocklawaha River work a week after her husband's death.

"I've just kind of got this philosophy, you just gotta pick yourself up and keep going," she says.

Baillie says Spontak's resilience is one of her key traits.

"Her passion enables her to push through, no matter what," Baillie says.

Looking ahead, Spontak remains optimistic about the Great Florida Riverway Trust's three-part plan focusing on the restoration of the Ocklawaha; potential recreation projects resulting from transition of the Rodman Reservoir to the naturally flowing river; and a net economic benefit the group says will be $198 million over 20 years, with a return on investment of $2.09 per dollar spent.

"We just got through with commissioner meetings in Marion and Putnam counties," she says, "trying to get local leaders on board."

"In 50 years, nobody's been able to even get through the Legislature," Spontak adds. "And I would say we have very good legislative support right now."

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