

# Many volunteers join in FOTO spring cleanup of the Occoquan River



Proving the truth of the old saying "many hands make light work," FOTO Volunteers purge the Occoquan Watershed of 2.8 tons of litter during April 14 annual spring clean up. Renate and Betty Vanegas pose for a photo with SGM Joe L. Neely and the JROTC Viking Battalion from WSHS.

Kate Godfrey / the Old Bridge Observer

## An army of volunteers turns out for river cleanup

By KATE GODFREY  
Observer staff

Friends of the Occoquan (FOTO) had a record number of volunteers turn out April 14 for the river cleanup.

Renate Vanegas, a FOTO founder, said nearly 100 people helped remove 1300 pounds of trash from the Occoquan at the Lake Ridge Marina. An additional 1020 pounds was removed from the Occoquan at the Bull Run Marina, and 1400 pounds of trash was collected at the Occoquan Regional Park.

Debris removed included 41 tires, a lawn mower and discarded pressure treated lumber.

Vanegas' daughter-in-law, Betty Vanegas, public affairs officer for FOTO, said it was the huge volume and type of trash, which concerned her. She wondered aloud whether "our rivers and environment could hold out long enough for the planet's inhabitants to wise up and learn that they can't continue on this way."

Joe L. Neely, overseeing the 17 members of the Viking Battalion from the Junior ROTC program at Woodbridge Senior High School (WSHS), mentioned that he is constantly amazed by what people throw into the Occoquan. Julia Ganoë says she comes with her battalion because "It is fun to hang out with your friends while doing something useful."

"Yeah," chimes in her fellow cadet Ashley Sayles, who adds, "And we all love the Occoquan."

Last fall was the first time Tom Wheeler and Lara Ohanian participated in a clean up at Lake Ridge Marina. Wheeler had read about it in the paper and invited Ohanian to volunteer for the clean up with him.

It didn't take much to convince her as Ohanian, a seventh grade science teacher at a school in Falls Church, recalls, "I was happy to help. My students are very pro-active, too. I am going to try to do a project of this type with them."

This spring, the Wheeler/Ohanian duo was back again.

"We got ten bags of trash from a cove along a trail where we hike. We have watched as the litter has increased over the past months there." Admitting that the growing accumulation of trash was making him angry, Wheeler said he couldn't just sit by and do nothing.

"I enjoy hiking and fishing here," he notes.

The Girl Scouts of Junior Troop 618 from Old Bridge Elementary School also were out in force.

Leader Michelle Woods read about the clean up and mentioned it to the scouts. Drawn by a communal desire to make a positive difference in their community, the girls decided to pitch in.

"Picking up trash is a good thing. You are giving back to the community," advises Jill Thompson.

Girl Scout Robyn Bleck made no

attempt to disguise how shocked she was by the number of cigarette butts she and her sister scouts picked up.

"There were hundreds of cigarette butts all along the road, in the water and even in the flower pots. Don't people realize that they are not biodegradable," she asks.

"My pet peeve is people who empty their ash trays in the parking lot, or the ones who smoke along the heavily wooded hiking trails. What are they thinking," Woods wanted to know.

Discussing their finds, Komal Sanghavi said she thought it was "sad that people are not respecting nature."

Emma Woods admitted she was "grossed out" by the beer bottles they were picking up in the woods, voicing her concern that they may have been left there by "teens acting wild."

From kindergartners to senior citizens the community responded to FOTO's call to action.

Quiet and energetic, Patricia Moler bustled around and policed up two bags of litter before heading out, happy to have done her part for the clean up effort.

Capitalizing on the nice weather, Julie Ellerts had her entire family, decked out in orange vests and wielding mechanical pinchers, policing the grounds for litter.

"I had to drag Magnus, kicking and screaming, at first," she acknowledges, gesturing to her 6'2" husband nearby. "However, once we started hitting the trails and cleaning, he got into it," she adds with a grin. "I think we all realized that this was a great idea. We were spending time together as a family, we were outdoors and we had a purpose."

Clean up coordinators were pleased with the turn out in general, but especially of those with boats. After numerous appeals for volunteers to come and bring their boats, several answered the call.

There was much excitement over the fact that one such boat owner, David Buchanan, proved to be the same person Renate and German Vanegas knew when he was a child.

"We know his parents, and I'm going to call his mother tonight and tell her she can be very proud of her son," reported Vanegas.

Mildred Daniels admits that she was "moved to tears of joy" by the turn out.

"I had gotten up at 4:30 a.m. I couldn't sleep. I had gotten myself so worked up and worried that no one would show up. I was afraid that people today have become too apathetic to care. But I was wrong," Daniels noted.

Adding her bag of trash to the growing pile to be picked up and hauled away, Daniels let out a sigh as she says she is "heading home to take a much needed nap. I was wrong, oh, thank God, I was wrong."