

## NELC Interview: Robin Corathers

*Robin Corathers is the executive director of the Mill Creek Restoration Project (MCRP), an Ohio nonprofit environmental organization. The grassroots group has received \$430,000 for restoration and education projects from the settlements of two NELC citizen enforcement lawsuits. The suits were brought against General Electric Company (GE) and Morton International for illegally discharging pollutants into the Mill Creek, which flows into the Ohio River. Both companies continue to support and participate in MCRP's Greenway and School Programs.*

### **What did Mill Creek and its watershed look like in 1994, when MCRP was founded?**

Mill Creek in southwest Ohio was a polluted and degraded stream with an industrial and urbanized watershed. In 1997, American Rivers designated Mill Creek as "the most endangered urban river in North America" because of the multiple stressors and sources of pollution impacting the river. Clearly, the river and its surrounding communities were in serious trouble.

### **How was the MCRP formed?**

In 1994, Rivers Unlimited, a statewide group, received \$360,000 from

NELC's settlement with GE to create the community-based Mill Creek Restoration Project. At that time, the river had been neglected, abused and written off for over a hundred years. Citizen action was long overdue. MCRP was formed to fill the gap and energize the river communities.

### **How have NELC's citizen suits helped MCRP achieve its goals?**

The money from the GE settlement provided critical start-up funding during MCRP's first three years of operation. As a result, we and our public and private partners have accomplished what was once considered impossible: establishing the Mill Creek Greenway Program, a comprehensive watershed management and restoration plan; offering environmental education and training in our local communities; advocating for community participation in environmental decision-making; and developing the Mill Creek Watershed Action Program. In 2002, we received \$70,000 from NELC's settlement with Morton, which has helped us fund the Greenway Program.

### **Of which MCRP accomplishment are you most proud?**

One of our most impor-

tant efforts has been educating local residents about the need to protect the river, and involving as many of them as possible in this effort. We have been developing and implementing three major projects near inner city, low-income neighborhoods which have been most affected by water pollution and blighted conditions. We actively recruit hundreds of civic and business volunteers each year for fieldwork, and provide training in river ecology and habitat restoration.

### **What plans does MCRP have for the future?**

We have made enormous headway towards improving the quality of the Mill Creek and engaging citizens in the protection and management of the watershed—but our work is not done yet. We will continue to work on restoration projects, including the creation of ribbons of open space along Mill Creek and its tributaries, as well as ecological regeneration of streambanks and wetlands. We also must work vigilantly to prevent future harm to the river and advocate for ways to reduce flood damage in the watershed that will not also cause collateral environmental harm. ◆



Robin Corathers and Ohio Governor Robert Taft plant a tree at a May 2002 ceremony presenting the first Clean Ohio Conservation Fund award to the Mill Creek Restoration Project.

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*— Robin Corathers*