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**Rebekah Paulson enjoys being in Stadium Woods, where visitors can observe the Virginia State Champion chokecherry tree. Members of Blacksburg's Master Naturalists inventoried the woods in the winter of 2011. They found 526 living trees over 12 inches in diameter. The 11.3 acres of woods provide a 15-acre canopy in downtown Blacksburg.**



# Paulson's environmentalism has deep roots

**Pat Brown**

Correspondent

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech's Stadium Woods are not the first trees Rebekah Paulson has fought to preserve.

When she was 11 or 12 years old, her favorite climbing tree was threatened by road improvements near her family's farm in the Dismal Hollow community near Front Royal. Located at the end of the family's driveway, the tree jutted out into the gravel road that was destined to be paved.

"I climbed it all the time," Paulson recalled recently. "So I threatened to sit in it to keep them from cutting it down."

The young Paulson won the battle — sort of. Construction circumvented the tree, but the crew removed all the lower branches that had made Paulson's "cigar tree" (a Catalpa) so easy to climb.

And there was an apple tree in the farm's orchard that young Paulson, with grafting help from her father, had grown. "I've been an environmentalist all my life," she said, adding that she raised chickens and goats and entered her goats in 4-H competition.

Since 2011, Paulson has devoted herself to saving the Stadium Woods, an 11.3-acre stand of old growth forest that Virginia Tech at one time planned to cut down to make room for an indoor football practice facility. That plan has been scrapped, Tech official say, but there is no guarantee that the trees are protected for the long haul. The trees comprise a unique old growth stand of predominantly white oak. Fifty-seven trees are over three feet in diameter, and some are estimated to be around 300 to 400 years old.

At James Madison University, Paulson majored in political science. Her environmental conscience was raised by both her graduate studies and early work experiences. A paper she wrote on the Clean Air Act meant she had to research numerous environmental organizations and leaders. In her future work she would meet some of those environmentalists.

In the 80s, Paulson was working for the only independent power company in the nation.

"It was very values-centered," she said. The company used sustainable enterprise practices. For instance, for every tree they had to remove, they planted more trees and worked with the World Resources Institute to determine how many trees would be enough to offset their power plant's pollution over the course of its operation.

Another job found Paulson in charge of "corporate development and outreach, which basically means fund raising," she said. "Everything we did was focused on the environment."

In 2001 Paulson moved to Blacksburg. She joined the Newcomers Club, the Southside Garden Club and a hiking group.

"Judy Kirwan was one of the first people I met," she

See **Paulson**, page 4



said. Kirwan's husband, Jeff, is a former professor at Virginia Tech and is author of "Remarkable Trees of Virginia." With her hiking group, Paulson went to see the Keffer Oak, a tree in Craig County that is a feature in Kirwan's book.

In November of 2011, news broke that Virginia Tech planned to flatten the Stadium Woods, grade the land and create an indoor football practice field. A friend from Giles County was first to alert Paulson. When she learned of the plan, she went into action. "I called Jeff [Kirwan] and it just went from there," Paulson said, and began the campaign to save the trees.

### Grassroots movement

Paulson said she and others first wrote letters to the editor. They organized an online petition that, to date, has gathered more than 11,000 signatures. While an impressive number, Paulson stated the number of those who helped the petition along elected to remain nameless and out of the spotlight.

"People were organizing who were afraid of losing their jobs," she said. "Many have helped who remain anonymous."

Paulson urged those who were willing to write to Charles Steger, Virginia Tech president. She wrote an individual letter to each member of Tech's Board of Visitors.

The campus arboretum committee and eight other campus organizations, including student groups, passed resolutions opposing destruction of the trees. Paulson and her coworkers wrote commentaries to educate the public about their cause, called

the governor, senators, even First Lady Michelle Obama. Virginia's Sierra Club sent out an action alert on their behalf.

"We just told everyone we knew," said Paulson, who recalls 14-hour days of making contacts, planning, writing, being on the Internet. Along the way, the movement gained coverage from the Washington Post and CNN.

Paulson even got herself arrested in October of 2012.

When they heard that the football team was routinely instructed to park in Stadium Woods, Paulson and a small group (about 8 people) protested. Tech police arrived to tell them they would be arrested if they did not leave and Paulson calmly stated that they were busy marking the root systems of the trees. They reminded the police that parking cars on the root systems of the trees compacts the surrounding soil and damages both the roots and the tree's chances for survival.

"My officer was very nice," Paulson recalled, even though she said he cuffed her. The officer spent some time trying to talk two older women out of being arrested, Paulson said. But they stuck to their mission. One had even said, "being arrested was on her bucket list," Paulson noted.

Four people were arrested that day. One was a student.

Paulson said the trip to court was much worse than the trip to the police station. The four were counting on winning the day because they had been charged with disorderly conduct and yet had been cooperative with police during their arrests. To their surprise, the charge was changed to obstructing legal passage,





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**A Virginia Tech police officer leads Rebekah Paulson out of Stadium Woods for a trip to Blacksburg Police headquarters. Paulson and seven others protested in the woods that day because Virginia Tech football players are routinely instructed to park in the woods, potentially damaging the surrounding old growth trees.**





PHOTO BY PAT BROWN

**Unhappy at the sight, Rebekah Paulson stands by the stump of an old growth tree that Virginia Tech cut down after calling it hazardous. One forestry graduate criticized the university for taking the advice of commercial tree cutters rather than consulting its own forestry experts.**

so their case no longer looked so good. There were legal fees and court costs. A fundraiser the week before would offset the financial burden, but not a protracted fight. The student's problems were not over — he was called before the Tech Honor Court, Paulson said.

"The worst part for me was that they put an unflattering picture of me in the newspapers and published my age," Paulson joked.

#### Temporary victory

In August of 2012, Virginia Tech announced the trees will be saved, for now, and a different site would be found for construction of the indoor football field. But they would not promise that

Stadium Woods will be safe for the long haul. Paulson is still uneasy. She and others want to see Stadium Woods preserved in perpetuity.

The trees are ancient, with the oldest dating back to the 1600s. They are located between Blacksburg's Southside neighborhood and Lane Stadium. On an ordinary day, they offer a quiet, beautiful setting for birds, squirrels and walkers. Professors can use the area for research assignments and students can practice tree identification.

"This is a land grant school and one of the top forestry schools in the country," Paulson said. "The university is supposed to serve the commonwealth and the people first." Not, she explained, the athletic department.

"Old trees are more important than newly planted trees," she reminded. "They

absorb a lot more carbon. We need all the trees and all the rainforest. Most people who are the least bit connected to the environment accept this."

So Paulson will continue to solicit signatures, hold fundraisers like the one that was staged in early May and maybe even resume tours of Stadium Woods that her group used to raise awareness last year. Through Friends of Stadium Woods' (FOSW) website, she will seek donations for the endowment fund and encourage others to keep in the know through the group's Facebook page.

Already the university has cut down one of the large, old trees, stating it was a hazard. Members of FOSW and supporters, disagreed, noting the tree's thick walls.

"Our main goal is to work until Stadium Woods is preserved," said Paulson. "When people organize and they get their politicians involved, it's amazing what they can do."