

Carolyn Kane

The Trail Lady


 Carolyn Kane is shown from the waist up, wearing a bright pink jacket and black pants, riding a bicycle on a dark metal trestle bridge. The bridge spans a creek, and the background features trees with autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The sky is clear and blue.

Carolyn Kane worked with Fred Meijer to acquire and restore a historic trestle bridge that now crosses Fish Creek on the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail south of Stanton.

By Howard Meyerson

Carolyn Kane is known as “The Trail Lady.” It’s a moniker she laughs about, a badge she wears proudly given her more than two-decade commitment to developing rail trails in Michigan. Now 76 years old, she doesn’t ride her bike as often, but her enthusiasm for rail trails continues unabated.

“These trails are important for two reasons,” said Kane, a short and energetic woman. “They’re important for economic development. In Edmore, with the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, people come from all over and stay at the motel. One day they ride to Alma. The second day they ride to Greenville and back. They come in from Detroit, from Saginaw and southwest Michigan. People are also realizing the value of exercise. These trails (improve) the health of the local community. They are out exercising because of the trail.”

Kane lives in Vestaburg with her husband, Dale. The couple have been together for 58 years. She has worn many hats in her 22-year quest to see rail trails developed. She began in 1994 as a volunteer with the Friends of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail, then helped found the West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition and served on its board. Kane became a member of the first Michigan Rails-to-Trails Steering Committee and later, in 2002, became chairperson for Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance, a position she held until 2009.

Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed Kane, in 2010, to the Michigan Snowmobile and Trails Advisory Council. She not only facilitated the efforts of various trail groups in the years that led up to it, but also took the initiative to have two railroad corridors federally railbanked so they could be protected.

“I did that because property owners along those corridors could have taken it,” Kane said. “We knew people would try. Railbanking ensures that the corridor remains intact. It preserves it in perpetuity.”

Often funded with federal, state and local dollars, rail trails are expensive to build. Kane led the effort to raise \$2.3 million in local match money so 37.5 miles of corridor could be acquired from the Mid-Michigan Railroad. During her years with the West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition, the organization raised \$6 million for area trails.

Kane, who would develop a good relationship with the late Fred Meijer, also worked with The Meijer Foundation, the Michigan DNR and the Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance to establish a \$3 million trail maintenance endowment for the 125-mile Mid-West Michigan Rail Trail Network.

Meijer and Kane were honored as trail champions in 2011 by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national non-profit based in Washington D.C. The organization annually gives its Doppelt Family Rail-Trail Champions award to individuals who go “above and beyond in the name of trails.”

“Carolyn was omnipresent in all things trail with the Mid-Michigan Fred Meijer Trail Network, offers Mike Julien, Meijer Foundation administrator. “We looked at her as the lead champion of those Mid-Michigan trails: the Heartland, Flat River Valley and Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee and Grand River Valley trails.

“There were very few maintenance funds set up in the country. Fred was in favor of it. It was an innovative approach

to a multi-county resource. She and Fred got along great. He had great respect for what she had done.”

Kane grew up on a Shiawassee County family farm. She remembers how it was. Her father worked in a Lansing factory. She and her mother milked the cows. Her then beau, Dale, would have to wait for her to finish before the two could go out on a date. For fun, the family boated and water skied around Harrison and Lake Station where Kane’s father bought a cottage. Snowmobiling followed soon after.

Upon completing high school, Kane got a job with General Telephone and Electric Corporation where she worked in accounting and advanced to management, retiring in 1993, just about the time the 45.8-mile Fred Meijer Heartland Trail started moving forward. She was not a cyclist then, but began to consider the possibilities.

“It started with the idea of preserving rail corridors for recreation,” explains Kane. “I was an avid snowmobiler and Dale and I went up to Copper Harbor for a three-day snowmobile trip down to Ontonagon. In the back of my mind I was thinking there

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is the Heartland Trail. We had nothing here then, but I thought if we did, we’d be able to go out on it and bike or take a walk.”

That notion lit a fire in Kane, who lived close to the proposed trail. She got involved with the Friends of the Heartland Trail, a grassroots organization that advocated for its development and helped with fundraising. She remained its secretary for 14 years.

The first 29-mile segment of the abandoned CSX Railroad corridor was acquired by the group in 1994 with the help of Fred and Lena Meijer who made a donation through The Meijer Foundation. Further donations and acquisitions allowed the trail to expand to 42 miles. It took 18 years to build. The last segment was finished in 2011.

Today, the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail runs 25.8 miles northeast from Greenville to the village of Edmore where it turns east and continues 20 miles to Alma, the home of Alma College and an annual Scottish Highland Festival. The route takes riders through scenic farm country where potatoes are grown. It passes



A photo with fellow members of the Michigan Trails & Greenway Alliance during a dedication ceremony for the Fred Meijer Pioneer Trail. Carolyn (seated center) served as chairperson of the organization from 2002 to 2009.



On September 22, 2010, at the Pere Marquette Depot in Belding, Carolyn Kane and other stakeholders celebrated the purchase of 37.5 miles of railroad right-of-way from the Mid-Michigan Railroad.

through woods, meadows and wetlands and over Fish Creek via a historic trestle bridge built in 1887.

Kane and Meijer worked to acquire the bridge, which was originally located elsewhere and about to be sold by the Montcalm County Road Commission. It was listed for sale in the local newspaper. Kane saw the ad and had an idea.

“We were in process of talking about how to get a bridge over Fish Creek,” says Kane. “I wrote a letter to the county saying the Heartland Trail would like to acquire the bridge. At the same time, the Meijer organization wrote a letter saying they wanted the bridge. I don’t know to this day what Fred intended to do with it, but when we submitted our letter, he helped fund moving it and restoring it.”

Kane would later enjoy riding the Heartland Trail with six of her grandchildren. That experience remains one of her personal highlights.

“We had some really great times because of the trail,” Kane said. “Those memories with the grandchildren...they still talk about those things.”

Nancy Krupiarz, executive director for the Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance describes Kane as detail-oriented and determined once she sets a goal, a problem-solver who will ask questions when she doesn’t know the answers.

“The more you get to know her, the more you realize she has a raging fire inside. Once she makes up her mind, nothing will stop her. She’s like a bulldog on a bone,” Krupiarz said. “She got the Fred Meijer River Valley Trails going. The state might have gotten involved, but reluctantly so. She picked it up and ran it forward as her baby.”

Kane retired from trail work in 2015, but not before getting involved with the Mid-West Michigan Trail Authority in 2010. The authority was created to provide a single management entity for the multi-county trail. It is made up of representatives from Ionia and Shiawassee counties and the city of St. Johns. It serves as the trail manager and directs how the endowment’s maintenance funds are spent.

Kane laughs at the suggestion that her unwavering persistence caused tension in some parts of the trail world, sometimes with government and local decision makers. She is known to be head-strong and determined.

“I have been called a bulldozer,” Kane says gleefully. “But I had a goal and one of my favorite Bible verses is ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’ It’s in the Book of Proverbs. I try really hard to work with people, but once I get an idea, I need to follow through.”

Kane’s enthusiasm, determination and persistence earned Fred Meijer’s respect, according to Julien. “She’s earned her retirement.”