

Meet the Highlands roadtrip guides

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Elliott Ruga

Hometown: Harding

Position: NJ Highlands Coalition Senior Policy Analyst and Campaign Coordinator

Grassroots: Tell us about the path that brought you to the NJ Highlands Coalition.

Elliott Ruga: Except for looking back, I really can't see a defined path. I had a 17-year career at NBC where, among its highlights, I went to three Olympics and came away with two Emmy Awards. I was a house dad for five years. I am still a filmmaker and a photographer. I have also done professional writing. I have always felt strongly about preserving our environmental and historic resources. Four years ago I was considering producing pro-bono video to help publicize the Coalition. During a lunch to discuss the film with Julia (Somers), who was at the time recently appointed as the Coalition's executive director, she mentioned that she was looking to hire staff and asked me if I had anyone to recommend. Mulling it over, I realized I had a recommendation — me! The funny thing is, I am now finally getting to making that film.

GR: What is an average day like for you?

ER: I have no idea. I haven't had one yet. I could be in Trenton, commenting at a State agency or at the State House, or huddling with other environmentalists. I could be in Boonton, working on an Op Ed, or putting together a presentation about the Highlands for later in the evening. I could be reading up on applied environmental science, such as standards for septic density, or the impacts of linear utility projects on the ecology of New Jersey's core forests. Or I could be planning a campaign meeting with a citizen's group. It's never boring.

GR: What makes the work worthwhile?

ER: It's usually the small advances we make that I can see how our work makes a difference. People are slowly becoming more aware of the New Jersey Highlands and what it provides. The press is paying more attention to our message. Our Coalition only continues to grow in membership. Legislators, elected officials and agency heads are listening. More and more often we are invited to the table. Seeing these changes occur over time makes what we do here worthwhile.

GR: What is your favorite place in the Highlands? Why?

ER: I really enjoy some of the places that I only know about because of my work. For now, it's an area, not a place. That area encompasses the hamlets and farming communities that hug the Musconetcong River in Warren and Hunterdon counties. Why? Because it is enchantingly beautiful. Why else? And when I am done exploring, there will be another place.

Julia Somers

Hometown: Harding

Position: NJ Highlands Coalition Executive Director

Grassroots: Tell us about the path that brought you to the NJ Highlands Coalition.

Julia Somers: I had been executive director of the Great Swamp Watershed Association for over 16 years. When the position of executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition became open, it seemed the right time to make a move to work on many similar issues that I worked on at GSWA but on a much larger scale. It was also a great opportunity to work more closely with many people I had come to know and respect over the years who were leaders in New Jersey's environmental field. I have never regretted making the move, but do miss my friends at Great Swamp.

GR: What is an average day like for you?

JS: As executive director, I am typically looking at the big picture, along side the great people who work here and serve on our board and committees. We address both the administrative challenges of running an effective small non-profit and the broad policy issues ongoing in the Highlands. We assist our members and provide service in any ways that are helpful to them and to our mission. This means my days are never boring, and there is always something more to do before I leave for the day. The Internet has made communication among many people much quicker and more effective, which is important in a Coalition of more than 60 organizations and hundreds of individual members, but I also spend time on the phone, writing and attending meetings throughout the Highlands or in Trenton.

GR: What makes the work worthwhile?

JS: It is extremely rewarding to work on something so important to the future of New Jersey. The Highlands are a primary source of drinking water for 5.4 million of New Jersey's residents — that's 64 percent of our population — and many of the state's major industries. They also contain some of the most visited parks in the northeast of the United States (the four-state Highlands region sees more than 14 million visitors every year — that's more than Yellowstone), more than 110,000 acres of important agricultural lands, the amazing history of the Revolution that's part of the fabric of this nation, incredible natural resources and spectacular beauty. I work with wonderful people — what's not to like? It's a great job!

GR: What is your favorite place in the Highlands? Why?

JS: That's an unfair question! There are so many fabulous places in this lovely region, such as

Bearfort Fire Tower where you can turn around 360 degrees and only see forested mountains, lakes and, in the distance, Manhattan (and this is New Jersey!); beautiful Ken Lockwood Gorge, where fishermen come from all over the country to fly fish for trout; Teetertown Ravine Nature Preserve in Lebanon Township, a fabulous Hunterdon County park with glorious views, great camping and hiking; most of Morris County's unrivaled park system; Jockey Hollow and the Ford Mansion with its museum, poignant reminders of what people suffered to found this country. And this is just a small sample of what the Highlands have to offer. But I think my favorite place has to be the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, a place of quiet magic, thrilling discovery and extraordinary diversity. I live close by and I am very lucky to be so privileged.

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