

BY SUNNY MONTGOMERY

Dr. Caca and her Royal Flush (in Conservation)

In the Caribbean, they call her “Dr. Caca.” But Mary Beth Sutton calls herself a scientist and an educator. Though none of these describe her personality.

Sutton is vivacious and cheery — the kind of person who speaks in exclamation points. She is founder and director of nonprofit organizations Caribbean Student Environmental Alliance (SEA) and TenneSEA, which are devoted to clean water in the Caribbean and Southeastern Tennessee. When she is not organizing educational classes, building wetlands or testing water, she helps run Gear Closet on Chattanooga’s North Shore, which sells secondhand outdoor gear with a portion of the proceeds donated to her clean-water projects.

Outside her office at Gear Closet sit two old toilets repurposed into flower pots. Sutton nods to the commodes and says, “If you talk to me long enough, then we always talk about poop.” Or “caca,” as it is called in the Caribbean.

“Your ‘number two’ is our No. 1 problem in water,” says Sutton, whose affinity for water is lifelong.



PHOTO: MAURA FRIEDMAN

MARY BETH SUTTON

Sewage, she says, is threatening clean water from St. Lucia to Signal Mountain.

Long before she was “Dr. Caca,” Sutton was a self-described “river rat.” One of eight children growing up, she says her family spent the summers in a cabin on Watts Bar Lake. “It was maybe 10,000 square feet for ten people,” says Sutton. “My mom would

say, ‘OK, everybody, get outside!’” So she and her siblings spent their days hunting frog eggs and mayfly larvae.

When Sutton was 4 years old, her mother introduced her to snorkeling — and subsequently, the Caribbean. They would take trips to the Florida Keys, Cozumel and the Cayman Islands.

“Mom just loved snorkeling.

We’d go out for hours and hours. It was magical,” Sutton remembers. “You couldn’t stop looking. There was too much to see.”

For example, there were spotted eagle rays, brain corals, sea urchins, and schools of fish so large Sutton couldn’t count them all.

“If you stayed still long enough, ‘cleaner fish’



the distance as we can see, which is perhaps all the way to North Carolina. Their rolling topography gives them a sampled look, and their shyness gives the impression that they're thickly blanketed in AstroTurf. This forest green is speckled with deep red, the beginning of a colorful wave I hope we'll get the opportunity to bask in this year. I can see how you could lose yourself up here ... or find yourself. I can't under too much, though, as I'm still trying to talk my stomach down.

I ask if I can try my hand at piloting the glider. As I gently push the control stick rising up from the floor between my legs from side to side, I'm reminded of my attempts on arcade racing games like Cruis'n USA. The stick moves easily; almost too easily. I have trouble keeping the glider level and find myself overcompensating. Perhaps it is my nerves.

Perhaps it is my nature. Perhaps it is the air pockets that catch us and, with my exploratory nudging of the stick, cast us into what could quickly become a nauseating spiral out of control were it not for Jason. While I think I could have managed it with a bit more focus and practice, I realize that's not the main draw for me.

I always come down from my high-flying adventures with a new perspective. Earlier that same day, in a bit of reflection, I had lamented that while I do not shy from adventure, I don't necessarily embody it. I don't necessarily feel invigorated stepping completely outside my comfort zone. On the other hand, I've always been terrified of falling into the "comfort" trap; of becoming stuck, not growing, not moving forward. I was finally able to see that growth doesn't have to lie in fully embracing adventure, but in the willingness to try it.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

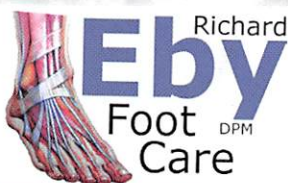
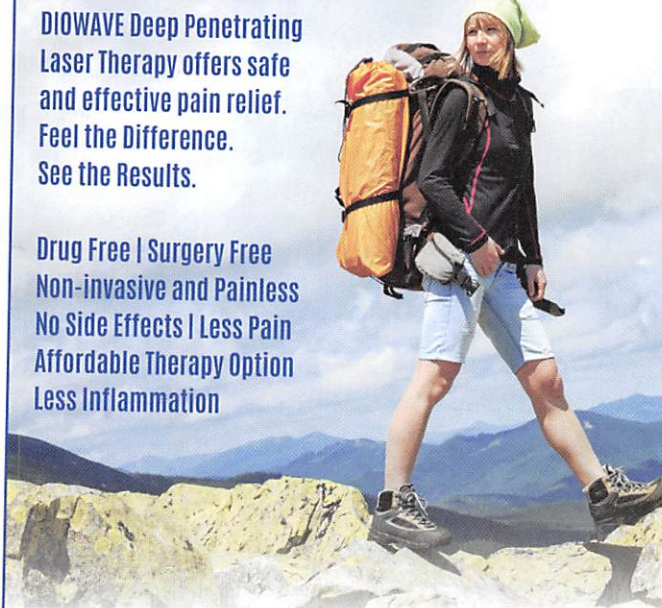
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"We have kids from Signal Mountain who have never seen a crawdad in the wild, who have never seen a salamander in a spring. If kids don't experience it, they're not going to love it."

might come in to see if you needed any algae cleaned off you. Of course," she adds, "that was before everything started dying."

Over the last 20 years, the Caribbean has lost 80 percent of its coral reefs due to climate change, pollution and, yes, sewage.

"We do better sewage treatment in the States, but even our infrastructure fails," Sutton says.

In 2014, a pump station near South Chickamauga Creek malfunctioned and flooded a 3-mile stretch of the tributary with raw sewage, killing thousands of fish. It gushed for hours before a couple kayakers paddled upon the mess.

"Oh look! A sewage fountain!" Sutton says, throwing her arms over her head to demonstrate the spew.

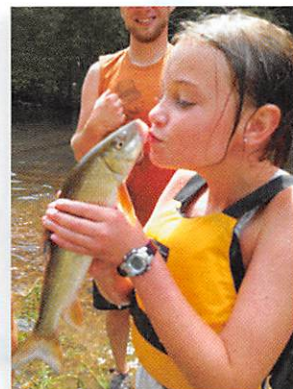
Sutton is on a mission to save the planet, one stream at a time. But she isn't doing it alone. Her organizations' focus is on the next generation.

"We have kids from Signal Mountain who have never seen a crawdad in the wild, who have never seen a salamander in a spring. If kids don't experience it, they're not going to love it," she says.

Education is always first, she says. Children must learn about their community before they can lead it.



BELIZE



approved it and had it built. Students at Skyuka Hall in Red Bank planted butterfly gardens and worked with a local landowner to design a wetland.

The wetland was completed last spring and is now flourishing.

"The reason I'm a crazy naturalist is because of my mom. Not only would she kick us out of the house, but she'd say, 'Hey, come look at these wildflowers.' Or, 'Let's go look for snakes. Let's go look for turtles,'" Sutton says.

Her nurtured love for the natural world has now carried her all over the world, from white sandy beaches to cool mountain springs — like Big Creek, located on the Tennessee-North Carolina border in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

It is full of life, she says. It teems with tadpoles, crawdads, stoneflies and salamanders. If Sutton can get the next generation to love the wild just a fraction as much as she does, then perhaps it will be that way always. She is hopeful for the future.

"Water is nature. I can't afford to get jaded," says Sutton. Like the schools of fish once too numerous to count, "There is so much possibility," she says.



"I can't go to a Caribbean place as a crazy white lady and tell them what to do. That is not sustainable. But when you can help change come from within, then that is sustainable," says Sutton.

She calls it positive action.

For example, last year TenneSEA received grant funding from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture for

the EPA's 319 Program which it used to help initiate science programs in local schools. Students at Red Bank High School learned to calculate stormwater runoff, then designed and constructed their own rain garden. Students at Signal Mountain's Thrasher Elementary also designed a rain garden, then proposed their plans to the principal, who