

Legend of Newt Hardie lives on



Andrew Waters

Above the printer at the Land Trust for Central North Carolina, someone taped an article about an invasive species management group out of Spartanburg called the Kudzu Coalition, led by the mysterious-sounding Newt Hardie.

For us, invasive species management was one of those dark corners of land conservation nobody knew or cared much about, a corner of incomprehensible government programs with bizarre acronyms, a use of chemical herbicides we weren't too eager to acknowledge or promote, and a whole lot of time and resources that were scarce and hard to come by for any nonprofit, let alone a tiny environmental one.

That a town such as Spartanburg, not that different from our own town of Salisbury, N.C., had its own organization dedicated to this issue was big news, and that this organization did its work primarily with volunteers and without chemical applications was darn near miraculous.

Over the years, I must've read that article 20 times, just waiting for stuff to print. When I had the opportunity to fill Mary Walter's shoes at the Spartanburg Area Conservancy (SPACE) back in 2013, the

Kudzu Coalition factored into my decision. It seemed like there was an awareness of habitat restoration here that didn't exist in other cities across the South. It wasn't the only reason I took the job at SPACE, but it was one of them.

It wasn't long before I actually met Newt Hardie and had the opportunity to become even more amazed. I'm sure anyone who ever worked with Newt can tell you about his hand-written notes, the meticulous documentation he kept for every site the Kudzu Coalition, soon to be renamed the Trees Coalition, ever took down.

He had an engineer's mind and attacked invasive species management with a left-brain approach that my right-brain mind found fascinating and slightly bizarre. It wasn't long before I was a proud graduate of Newt's academy and started religiously attacking the English ivy on the trees in my own yard. Every time I pull ivy, I think of Newt, who passed away on May 5.

But there was a lot more to Newt than just being a relentless kudzu killer. His work with the Trees Coalition exposed him to Spartanburg's shadow world of homeless encampments, and he often shared information with me, and I'm sure with others, about some of the conditions he discovered.

He was a man of compassion, his heart always open to society's misfits and displaced. I will remember him as much for his efforts to take some of these folks

under his wing, to give them a helping hand, as I remember him for his habitat restoration work.

On occasion, Newt shared with me some thoughts on leadership, and on life. Before he got sick, I always felt like he was keeping an eye on me, that he wanted me to succeed. It's fair to say he was bigger and more generous to me than I was to him. He was that kind of guy.

Thinking back on that article, I often referred to Newt as a "legend." Newt was never one for accolades, and he would always eye me quizzically when I called him by that word. It's true I was teasing him, a little, but it's also true I meant it sincerely.

I often tell people that Spartanburg takes the Trees Coalition for granted, that we don't understand what a truly unique and special group it really is because we have been so fortunate to have it here for so long. So let me tell you now: Newt Hardie was one of a kind, and if there are other groups out there similar to the Trees Coalition, there are none just like it, and the ones that are were probably influenced by Newt.

I don't know what's next for the Trees Coalition. Like several people I know, I've been thinking about it. You can't replace a guy like Newt Hardie, but I hope there's some way to let his legend live on. He earned that from us.

Andrew Waters is the executive director of the Spartanburg Area Conservancy.