

“There is a way”



**In memory of Kris Unger, Primary Conservator of Friends of Accotink Creek
January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2019, and always a friend of the Earth.**

The somber news:

Dear friends,

12/30/2024

After a beautiful family week spent on the west coast near Tofino, our son Kris left life quietly and peacefully on Christmas Day in the morning. While still recovering from a major Bipolar 1 episode, he was just overwhelmed by hopelessness over the state of the Environment, the ongoing brutal wars and conflicts, and more recently, the worsening political situation in the US (he grew up and lived some 30 years in the Washington area). His love of Nature had no limits, but Weltschmerz overcame him.

His last act of kindness on Christmas Eve was to change our path when walking along Long Beach so as not to disturb a flock of shore birds who were feeding in the intertidal zone. He was modest, gentle and kind, and loved children and cats; he had high moral standards. For many years he tended a beautiful vegetable garden and also helped a beekeeper friend with his hives. While in Washington Kris worked tirelessly as a volunteer leader on watershed protection, community action and environmental education in schools. He had great knowledge of vernal pools and loved exploring them. In 2010 his leadership was recognized, and he was named the "Potomac Riverkeeper of the Year". For many years he organized and led weekly nature outings for inner-city children from SE-Washington sponsored by the Sierra Club.

Kris traveled widely and, born in Malaysia, he had lived in five countries before he was ten. He climbed in the Austrian Alps, the Canadian Rockies, the Himalayas in Bhutan, and the Andes in Ecuador. He paddled many lakes and rivers, and canoed down the Potomac River from its source all the way to the open ocean. He trekked in the Amazon jungle and through a remote volcanic island in Vanuatu. And one early spring day in Falls Church, VA, he pulled three boys out of a pond after they had broken through the ice - and once they were safely with their parents, he just walked home in his wet and cold clothes.

He loved and cared for his family, and we love him deeply. I have lost a son and also my best friend and companion. All three of us are deeply heartbroken and Marilyn and I are grateful that Valerie will stay with us until the 24th of January. We're planning a small nature burial here in Victoria and should have more details later this week. And we hope to have a Celebration of Life in June back in Alberta.

PS: His Austrian nephews remember how on a hike through a dense forest wetland he kept reassuring the boys saying "Es gibt einen Weg" (There is a way).

- Heinz Unger

The Tributes:

"Kris was directly responsible for helping me define and direct my passion for environmental stewardship and how to get involved to advocate in changing policy. I can remember meeting him for the first time at an Earth Day event at NOVA Community College maybe about a decade ago. He was warm, inviting and had a peaceful joy about him that was unlike anyone I had ever met. As I worked with him that day, students of all ages would come up to him to say hi and update him on something they had seen or did in a stream or forest. He listened intently and enthusiastically to each of them and offered great praise at the end of their story for their efforts. Watching that interaction for hours that day I was convinced that I wanted to emulate it and was encouraged to focus my energy into my local watershed. When Friends of Long Branch Stream Valley was created, I would consult with Kris for advice, which he seemed to always respond with "Follow the energy." I'm glad my last words to him before leaving were expressing how I will be forever grateful for all of his mentorship and partnership throughout the years and that I will continue to stay committed to the work we had started." - Bryan

"I only met Kris once but I recognized in him a sensitivity that is so critical to protect. I am sorry he is no longer amongst us." - Edith

"I am deeply saddened by this unexpected news about Kris. We have lost a passionate, intelligent advocate for the environment. He was a thoughtful, caring person to others and on behalf of nature. He had a childlike curiosity that was very engaging and he was a truly good listener—a rare attribute in this noisy world where most people simply want to be heard—and he made you feel not only "heard" but valued. I think meeting Kris was the spark that led to my advocacy for environmental conservation." - Kathryn

"I knew and worked with Kris while he was in the area. He was devoted to environmental stewardship and we are all better off because of his efforts." - Marcia

"I'm devastated. He was a unique soul who helped resurrect Friends of Holmes Run at a critical time, and we owe him a huge debt for that. Just one of many ways he put himself out there for all the right causes. He was a true friend of watersheds and wildlife, whose local impact is ongoing. I depended so much on his wisdom and advice when we were getting started. I admired his conscience and generosity. Kris's mission in this world was selfless and many of his deeds are still generating fruit, as evidenced by the fact that so many of us describe how he helped catalyze new initiatives, organizations, life direction, passion for the environment, etc. in our respective lives." – Whitney

"These are heavy days. He was a fierce advocate with a big heart. I'll never forget what he told me when I asked him early on what he saw as the best solution for the Lake Accotink issue. He said "I just want people to talk. May we all do our best to drive the positive change Kris wanted so badly to see happen." – Renee

"Very sad to hear this. We and Mother Nature lost a good one." - Ron

"This is such sad news. Kris has been such a wonderful and inspiring part of my life for over two decades ... as neighbors, friends and coworkers. His love of nature and enthusiasm was contagious to children and adults alike. The world is diminished with his passing. My advice to all of us who see what is happening – *'Be like the plants – grow to the light and never give up'*." - Jeanette

"I remember him vividly at events often dressed in costume highlighting nature or protesting plastic bottled water, etc. seemed always the passionate environmentalist." - Gary

"Will and I are heartbroken and devastated to hear of Kris's passing. Kris's incredible charisma and unwavering passion were the sparks that ignited my son Will's environmental journey. He was a truly beautiful soul, and his impact on us will never be forgotten." ❤️ Mimi



From Will's first project with Kris in 2015



To this: 2023 Fairfax County Environmental Excellence Award

"Words don't capture the profound sadness this news brings. It is truly a devastating development and many of us remember how hard Kris worked to make the environment better. I am happy to have known him, worked with him, laughed with him, and shared our cats. We need more people who care the way he did." - Amy

"Kris lives on in so many ways." - Dave

"It looked like Kris had so much more kindness to give to those around him, and a strong clear voice for the natural world. Sad news indeed." - Avril

"Kris was a wonderful person and stalwart conservationist who made a big difference here in the D.C. region. He will be greatly missed." – Rod

"I thoroughly enjoyed working with him. His love of talking to the crows and helping children understand their watershed was inspiring." - Melissa

"Kris was a modest, gentle soul. Most of us knew nothing of the many places he had been. Scroll through the many newspaper articles online to see his legacy." – Sue

"The world needs more Kris Unger's. My life is better - having known and worked with him." - Tony

"My heart breaks for Kris. He always had such a big heart for the world and was one of my first mentors in FACC. I am praying for healing in his family and our community this year". – Julie

"Kris was a gentle soul but a lion of an advocate. He taught me a great deal; I can say that many of his lessons are foundational to how I teach my children about stewardship and conservation. He will be missed." – Joe

"Kris invited all of us to seek friends and connections, to remain aware, curious and thoughtful, and above all, to talk to others and take action together. Let us honor and respect what Kris was able to accomplish, his special gifts to all of us and the world around him. Go in peace Kris. You are remembered." – Cindy

"Kris was an environmental warrior. He was intensely passionate about our natural world. I will always keep his memory alive as I continue to fight for protections to our natural world. I will continue this work and be persistent at it just like he was. I hope he would be pleased." - Cathy

"Chris was the most passionate environmental educator and advocate that I've ever worked with; his love of the natural world was a defining characteristic of his existence. Part of his legacy will live on in all the students whose love of and fascination for nature was sparked during one of Chris' guided nature hikes." - "Another memory is how he kindly corrected me the first time and joked with me the second time I misspelled Kris' name in an email ... he's probably rolling his eyes at me now. He will be missed." :) – Kim

The Works of Kris:



Americana Park - meadow planting



Accotink Creek - cleanup



Americana Park - meadow planting



Americana Park - meadow planting



Accotink Creek - canoe trek



Lake Accotink - Inspiring Connections Outdoors youth outing



Lake Accotink - corporate cleanup event



Public Hearing on Proposed Site Specific Plan Amendment (SSPA) 2018-I-1MS,

Testimony before Board of Supervisors
[Read a fine example of Kris' advocacy in his own words](#)



Inova Merrifield - forest preservation walk



Inova Merrifield - forest preservation walk



Americana Drive – illegal dumpsite cleanup



Accotink Gorge - botanical exploration



Accotink Gorge - wisteria control





Meadowwood Recreation Area - Inspiring Connections Outdoors youth outing



Wakefield Park - nature walk



Daniels Run Elementary School - outdoor classrooms upkeep



Little Run Elementary School - rain garden planting



Daniels Run Elementary School - stream tour



Lake Accotink - Inspiring Connections Outdoors youth outing



I-495 - erosion control inspection



Trash Action Workforce Day of Action



Save the Mermaids



Trash Action Workforce Day of Action



Congressman Connolly's Annandale office – climate advocacy with Citizens Climate Lobby



Trash Action Workforce Day of Action





Fairfax - defending disappearing vernal pools



Fairfax - defending disappearing vernal pools



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