

# The Valley Breeze

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## ***Blackstone couple win Chafee Heritage Award for preservation efforts***

By GEORGE BEAUBIEN, Valley Breeze Staff Writers

BLACKSTONE – The husband and wife team of Jim and Maggie Plasse were honored recently by the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission for their volunteer efforts with the Blackstone River Watershed Association.

The couple were named recipients of the Chafee Heritage Award during the Corridor Commission's annual dinner at Wright's Farm Restaurant, Nasonville, on March 8.

The Corridor Commission annually honors those who exemplify active involvement in projects, programs, and institutions promoting the cultural heritage, natural preservation and quality of life in the Blackstone River Valley.

Although the Plasses were honored for their work over the past several years with the local Blackstone River Watershed Association, they have a history of demonstrating passion for the preservation and improvement of watersheds.

Prior to moving to Blackstone six years ago, the couple was living in the area of Tewksbury, Mass., where they founded the Shawsheen River Watershed Association.

Jim, originally from Woonsocket, and Maggie, a Blackstone native, both retired as electrical engineers. Jim worked as a civil service worker for the U.S. Air Force at Hanscom Air Force Base in Bedford, Mass.; Maggie worked in the same capacity at MIT.

The couple is credited with a revival of the 30-year-old Blackstone River Watershed Association that began when they became members just four years ago.

As retirees, the couple had the time as well as a strong desire to strengthen the organization. As new members, the couple began raising their hands to volunteer for such projects as water quality monitors, canoe rental volunteers and taking surveys.

It was just a matter of time before both became BWRA board members. Their commitment led them to accept leadership positions. Maggie presently serves as the group's treasurer, with Jim well into his second term as board president.

The couple is credited with initiating strong participation with the Blackstone

River Coalition as well as leading fund-raising efforts to strengthen the BWRA's coffers.

They were able to secure funding to begin the process of removing Asian water chestnuts from the West River.

In 2006, more than 1,200 tons of the invasive plants were harvested from a 12-acre section of the river as a result of that effort. The couple is now in the process of hiring a contractor to begin another cleanup this year, the second of a three-part process to ensure the plants' permanent removal.

Maggie made use of previous experience to completely rebuild the BWRA's Web site into a standard-based interactive model. In addition, she created an efficient membership data base as well as a computer-based financial management program.

They were also honored for creating a new and improved newsletter that strengthens information networks among its members and other organizations.

Jim recalls the condition of the Blackstone River when he was living in the area in the early 1970s.

"I remember walking along the river and seeing all of the pollution, including the chemicals that were directly being drained into it by local manufacturers. I can remember thinking 'I don't even want to put my hand into it.'"

Much has changed since then, says Jim.

"It's gotten so much cleaner. Now it's common to see people fishing or paddling along the Blackstone. Maggie and I want to see it get even better."

For more information on the Blackstone River Watershed Association, log on to their Web site at [www.thebrwa.org](http://www.thebrwa.org).

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