

Photography courtesy of Gordon Humphries

Paving Waters

By Deena C. Bouknight

Photography by Lee Bradshaw, Kickstand Studio, and courtesy of Brian Harmon and Gordon Humphries

Jay Alley was not to be a minister like his dad. But there are all kinds of ministers of God’s Word, says the elder Alley, Joe. It was while canoeing down the Saluda River that Jay’s particular calling came. It was then he realized his church would be the river. His congregation would be disadvantaged children.

“God just laid it right on my heart,” Jay says. “I grew up on the Saluda River ... playing on it, paddling on it. I competed as a paddler for several years. But I also was able to relate to children and young people really well. These are the things God gifted

me with. So one day while I was praying and paddling, I just knew.”

In 1992, Jay announced to family and friends his vision for a ministry. He would call it Canoeing for Kids. He would introduce children to the outdoors, water, canoeing and kayaking. They would be children with special needs, those from the inner city and from broken homes. And everyone Jay told jumped on board the non-profit venture, lending support in various ways.

To raise awareness and revenues for his new ministry, Jay embarked on a marathon paddling trip in 1993. He paddled 2,000

miles from New York to New Orleans. The event generated nearly \$40,000.

Joe Alley, who had already declared himself director of publicity and development for his son’s ministry, prayed for and encouraged Jay during the paddling marathon. A paddler since childhood, Joe canoed with Jay during parts of the eight-week trip. A support team of twenty volunteers journeyed by car to carry supplies for the trip, to encourage Jay, to sometimes paddle with him, and to help publicize Canoeing for Kids.

Joe says it was while paddling with his son that Jay spoke about how God used

canoeing to give him purpose and direction. “Jay had some turbulence in his adolescence, as many young people do,” Joe says. “He was rebellious. A group of men from my church decided they were going to paddle the Gauley River in Virginia. One of the men asked me if he could take Jay. He felt it would do Jay some good. It did. When Jay returned, he was totally different. It was a radical, life-changing experience that he didn’t talk to me about until he was on his marathon trip.”

It was on one of the first Canoeing for Kids trips that Joe saw firsthand how God would use Jay and his paddling skills in this unusual ministry. “He called me and told me he was going to run a trip with a group of mentally challenged kids,” Joe says. “He asked me to go with him. I had spent a lot of time with mentally challenged people, and had studied mental illnesses and how people are affected. When I got there, these kids were like a group of wild animals. I was worried about them being on the river. But after we got them all into the canoes, a holy hush came over those children. ‘What is this,’ I asked myself. The theory I formed is that the power of the river gave those children an experience of awe – of the presence of God. It was that and Jay’s calming presence. We got a few miles down the river and I was sold. I knew my son truly had been called.”

He leads me ...

Canoeing for Kids is now a major resource for agencies and organizations that assist underprivileged and special-needs children. Jay initially thought his ministry would be small. “I thought I might be able to get about a

hundred kids involved during the summer months,” he says. Now in its sixteenth season, Canoeing for Kids serves about 1,200 children annually.

During the off months, Jay supports his wife, Rachel, and sons, Pierce and Joe-Joe, as a carpenter, painter, and baseball and football coach.

He also assists with the youth at his church, Trinity United Methodist. Yet, when June rolls around, his focus returns to the river and Canoeing for Kids.

“I’ve learned that some kids are just not exposed to anything outside their close community,” says Jay. “Many are from the inner cities around the state.” Even though these children are accustomed to many dangers in their neighborhoods, they are fearful of the river at first, he says. “It’s great to see a child who is very apprehensive relax after they have been in the canoe or kayak for a few minutes. I encourage the kids to take on their fear and conquer it. I love the relational aspect of this ministry.”

There are four on staff at Canoeing for Kids from June through August. Jay and a team of volunteers built a permanent facility on the Saluda River near US 378 and I-20. It houses twenty canoes, fifty kayaks and five rafts. Trips are scheduled seven days a week during summer months.



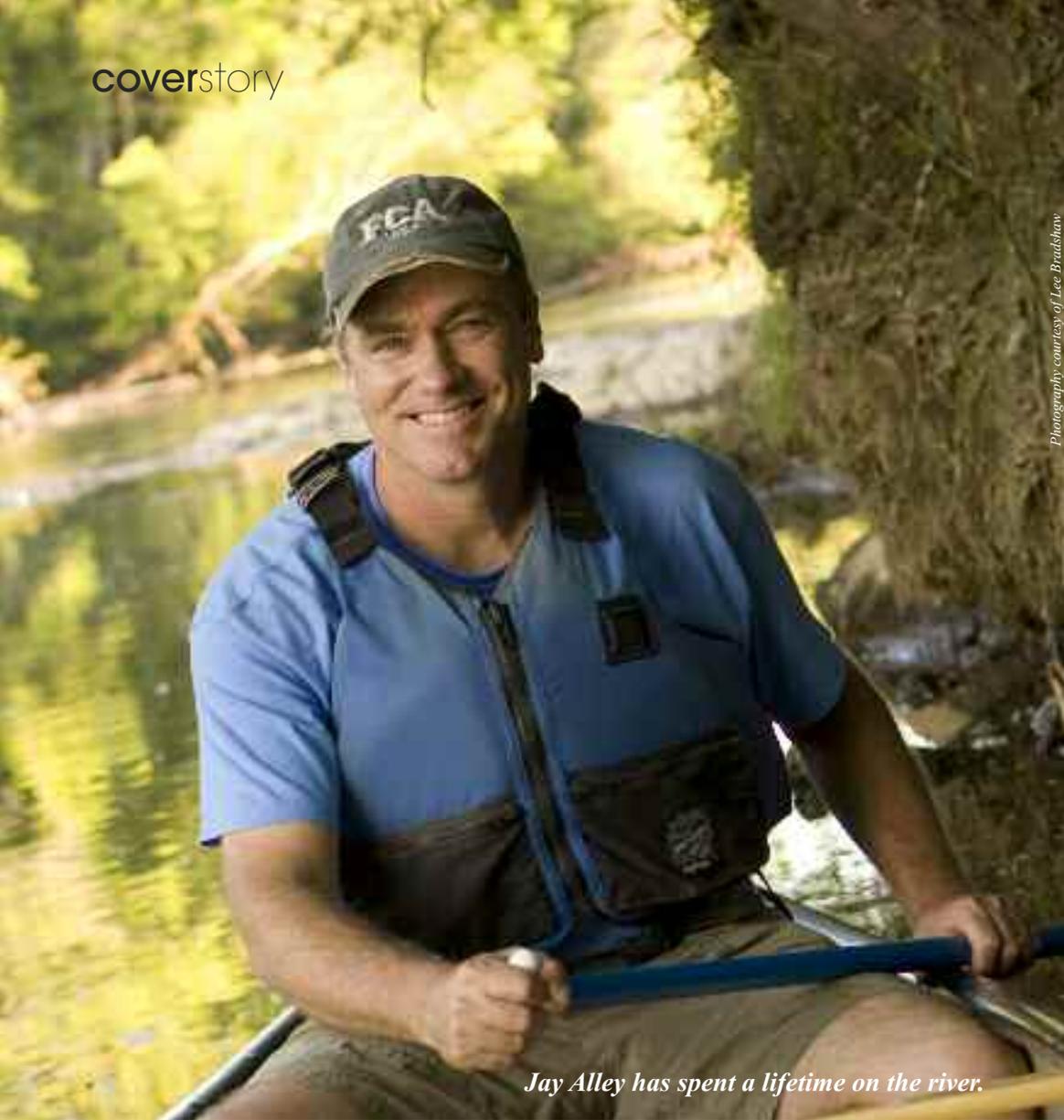
Photography courtesy of Gordon Humphries

Bailey Slice was hired nine years ago as a part-time assistant. She was just finishing her first year of college and Canoeing for Kids offered ideal summer employment. She continued working summers through graduate school and enjoyed it so much that she still works each summer while serving as full-time music director at St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church in Lexington.

Bailey teaches the kids paddling and safety on the water, and sometimes guides the trips. “It seems like I’ve seen every type of child,” she says. “It’s very rewarding to see them go from being so scared to completely comfortable.”

She remembers an autistic boy who barely spoke. He bonded with her so much on the river that he jumped into her arms when they finished a trip and gave her a big hug. She also remembers a day when everything imaginable went wrong, from bad weather to high water. Yet the kids came up to Bailey afterwards with big smiles and asked if they could do it again the next day. And then there was the badly injured boy

Photography courtesy of Gordon Humphries



Photography courtesy of Lee Bradshaw

Jay Alley has spent a lifetime on the river.

from a burn camp who brightened when he realized he could help her despite his crippled hands.

...beside quiet waters

Jay says he shares his faith with the kids by example. "I treat them respectfully and kindly. Sometimes I pray before we paddle."

Joe Alley says, "Jay told me one time that he just lets God's rivers do the talking with these kids. Sometimes it's not about words; it's about actions. And Jay just knows what to do with these kids. He's greatly respected and loved. I can tell you that."

But Jay hasn't been the only one to quietly minister to children involved in Canoeing for Kids. Until he died last year,

Jay's beloved Labrador retriever, Moose, had a big part in nurturing the kids. "He was a real mascot for our program," says Jay. "I can't explain it, but if a child was hurting or emotional, he knew it. He would seek that child out and because of (Moose's) gentle spirit, that child would come around. I don't want to offend anyone when I say this, but I think there was a lot of Jesus in Moose."



Moose was everyone's friend.

Photography courtesy of Brian Harmon

Jay recalls one time when a little girl was sitting on a rock eating her lunch during a canoeing trip. The girl, from Epworth Children's Home, was obviously troubled. Jay watched Moose approach the girl and sit next to her. The girl

held out her turkey sandwich to Moose, who just nibbled a tiny bite. Then she offered him another bite. They sat there and shared the sandwich while the girl's mood lifted.

"It was so sweet," says Jay. "Children just loved Moose... They would yell, 'It's Moose! And that man with the canoes.' They didn't remember my name, but they remembered Moose's." Now, Moose's offspring, Little, has taken his father's place.

Jay says that in spite of the challenges, the ministry has been rewarding. "It's an incredible blessing to do what I love, what I believe God gifted me to do." 🙏

Deena C. Bouknight lives in Columbia with her husband, Gary, and two children, Justin and Madeline. She is a home-school mom, literature teacher at Excelsior Academy, and free-lance writer for newspapers, magazines and books.



To help support Canoeing for Kids, Jay Alley hosts an annual golf tournament and sells Christmas trees. He also guides river trips for families, churches and other groups.



To book a trip or make a contribution, contact Jay at (803) 791-1727, (803) 348-0348, or cfkalley@bellsouth.net. Canoeing for Kids is located at 114 Riverchase Court near Lexington.