

Study A Broad

Becky Rom: Boundary Waters' True North

by Susan Kearns

Becky Rom was born to lead the Campaign to Save the Boundary Waters. As a third-generation resident of Ely, Minnesota, one of the gateways to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), she grew up in a family that cherished that wilderness and dedicated their lives to its protection.

Becky's father, Bill Rom, ran a successful outfitting business and store in Ely for nearly 30 years, and spent many hours roaming the woods. Bill studied under early wilderness warrior and author Sigurd Olson, who inspired both father and daughter to pursue wilderness advocacy work.

THE APPLE FALLS CLOSE

Becky took her first canoe trip at age two, hoisting a pint-sized pack made by dad. Put to work as soon as they were able, she and her three brothers carried packs across portages for canoe parties. Becky reminisces, "It was just what you did as part of the family."

Her parents instilled in her the belief that she could do anything. By the time she was 14, Becky was guiding canoe trips. She learned to fly a plane before she learned to drive. Not the typical 1960s teenager, this "girl guide" caught the interest of the media. She appeared on the television show *To Tell the Truth* and was featured in articles in *Seventeen* magazine and the Sunday newspaper magazine. Self-conscious, she shied away from the attention and wouldn't watch the television program when it aired.

But, she didn't shy away from advocacy. In school, she talked about the ideas her family shared nightly over the dinner table. In 1963, her class debated the

merits of the Wilderness Act. Becky gave her strongest argument, yet the class voted 148 to 2, overwhelmingly against the Wilderness Act. The other favorable vote came from her boyfriend; however, when the two broke up he changed his vote, leaving Becky as the lone "yea" on the debate.

"People from all over the world came into the store and would go on and on about how remarkable their experience in the wilderness was," said Becky. Yet, she said the folks of Ely didn't understand the value of the wilderness and the wonder it inspired. "People didn't go into the woods—especially girls. My family and our life were really unique."

A CAREER OF ADVOCACY

After attending Mt. Holyoke College and then law school, Becky spent time in Alaska and the Virgin Islands, eventually making her way back to Minnesota. After working as a trial lawyer and in real estate law, she joined the prominent law firm of Faegre & Benson in Minneapolis. She chaired the firm's pro bono committee, handling cases related to the Endangered Species and Wilderness Acts; she assisted organizations with citizen advocacy and lobbying, and has served on the Governing Council of The Wilderness Society since 1996.

In 2012, she returned to Ely to begin building what would become the Campaign to Save the Boundary Waters to protect the clean water, air, and forests of the BWCA Wilderness from mining of copper, nickel, and other metals. Becky's years as an attorney and conservationist was invaluable. Under her guidance, Northeastern Minnesotans



for Wilderness, the lead organization for the campaign, saw substantial growth. As they built the organization and the campaign, the group worked hard to learn all they could about mining. They studied successful movements and spoke with lawyers and activists from around the country to develop an effective strategy.

The threats continue as Twin Metals, a Chilean-based mining company with a terrible environmental record, pushes forward with a proposal to bring toxic sulfide-ore copper mining to the region. Those in Ely who favor mining feel the community needs the activity to prop up the local economy. Rom's argument: there is much more sustainable economic opportunity with tourism and *no mining* is a far better option for the health of the region and the citizens that make their home there. "Any decent economist recognizes the economic foundation of the community is wilderness," says Becky.

When asked if she had advice for Broads and Bros facing similar battles, she responded: Start early. Be clear on goals—utterly clear. Work hard on a strategy that gets you to a win and be completely focused on that strategy. Understand that diverse groups and organizations with differing points of view are important. And finally, make your issue local and national.

What keeps her in the fight? "I have a good support network. And, I do this for me, my dad, and Sig Olson—I feel an obligation to carry on their work." Nevertheless, she told members of the Campaign staff, "The next battle is yours. After our historic win for the Boundary Waters, this is my last campaign."

A Struggle for Wilderness

Even before the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, which included some protections for the BWCA, many Ely residents saw wilderness designation as a threat to mining, logging, and motorized tourism. They considered Bill Rom a traitor.

With the passage of the Wilderness Act, the BWCA fell prey to compromises that allowed some logging and motorized boats and portages to continue. Rom fought against these and other activities, stirring up local controversy that pitted economic development against wilderness protection, a division that continues to this day. It was not until 1978 that President Carter granted full wilderness status to the BWCA, eliminating logging and snowmobiling, restricting mining, and further reducing motorboats. For a timeline of the struggles faced by BWCA, visit: www.friends-bwca.org/about/history/boundary-waters-timeline