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A godmother on the waterfront

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By Will Kilburn, Globe Correspondent | March 20, 2005

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It's not a scene that most people would find inspiring. Most people, if they found themselves here, at night, in a gloomy section of East Cambridge riverfront dominated by towering highway ramps and piles of gravel, would head back out again as soon as possible.

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But to Renata von Tscharnier, this no man's land is the perfect blank canvas. It's not yet open to the public, a technicality that doesn't deter her ("It doesn't say not to go," she observes at a vaguely marked gateway) as she directs a visitor's car into a maze of muddy roads and black puddles of indeterminate depth.

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Von Tscharnier is president of the Charles River Conservancy, a group she founded five years ago to protect and improve the riverside parklands between Watertown and the harbor.

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"In the inner part here will be tennis courts, but when there are big events, like the X-Games, this area can all be event space," she said. Officially, this particular stretch of the river is no more significant to the conservancy than any other, but two things make it unique: It's the future home of a \$2 million skateboard park, a pet project of the Conservancy, and it's the site of the North Point Parks, set to open this fall, which will welcome visitors back to a long-forgotten gateway between Cambridge and Boston.

"This is unknown territory for anybody," she said. "Most people know the Esplanade, . . . but nobody has ever been down here."



Unknown territory is familiar ground for the Swiss-born von Tscharnier, who trained as an architect and city planner, worked in London and the Swiss city of Bern, and came to the United States in 1978.



The move "suited my feeling of adventure," she explained in an interview in the conservancy's offices, provided by EF Education in its building beside the new parkland. "I loved the broader spirit of this country. I loved the fact that you can still invent things."



That creative spirit was in full view a few days later at an October fund-raiser for the skate park at the Avalon nightclub on Lansdowne

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**Charles River
Conservancy**
c/o EF Center Boston
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Street. On a temporary halfpipe, skaters launched themselves toward the rafters while a mix of under-30 and over-50 supporters mingled to a soundtrack of modern dance and rock music.

The attire, from T-shirts to suits, reflected a theme of von Tscharner's work: The river is, and should be, a democratic place. It's a notion that was expressed best during the evening by perhaps the most famous Democrat there, Thomas P. O'Neill III, the former lieutenant governor whose father, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., while serving as speaker of the US House of Representatives, secured funding for the Big Dig and the parks that will one day cover it.

A skate dad himself, Thomas O'Neill III endeared himself to the skaters in attendance by mentioning the fines he paid for his son's skateboarding antics, and then talked about the river.

"When I was a kid, we used to swim in the Charles River," he said. "And then it was polluted, and all of the kids in Boston and Cambridge moved back into their neighborhoods because it wasn't inviting to us anymore.

"And then along came Renata, who wanted to reinvent the Charles River and make it clean and put beautiful greenery around it. You know why? For the quality of life in this town, so that everybody in this community can get reinvented back into the Charles."

But why a skate park? "Skateboarding, for me, is like watching dance," she said.

The admiration is returned. Vanik Hacobian, a professional skateboarder from East Boston, applauded von Tscharner for drawing skateboarders into the planning process.

Von Tscharner "seems to take the time to actually listen to skateboarders and find out exactly what needs to be done," he said. "There's a lot of time going into this project, and she's giving it her all."

Just as important, von Tscharner gets others to give their all. The conservancy has engaged hordes of volunteers to help with everything from painting fences and picking up trash to meeting with government bigwigs.

"She's very good at painting a very optimistic picture of how things can be on the river and then getting you involved," said architect Matt Petrie of Watertown, chairman of the skate park design committee.

Petrie said he had planned to pull up weeds along the Esplanade with other conservancy volunteers, but he found himself at State House meetings with von Tscharner, once she learned his field.

"She doesn't say, 'You have to come,' but she'll say, 'I'd really like you to come,'" he said. "She's like my mother away from home. I

want to do good by Renata, because she's doing good for so many people."

The Charles River Conservancy came about, fittingly, during a walk along the Charles one fall day. At the time, her husband, Peter Munkenbeck, recalls, she was focused on her children (now ages 14, 20, and 23) and on the education of others.

"Renata was figuring out what the next phase of her life was going to be," he said. "And as she walked along, she said, 'I need to stop teaching about the river, and I need to start acting to improve the river.' It came to her that she needed to commit herself personally to the job of improving the physical environment along both sides of the river."

Thus was born the Charles River Conservancy, which until last year was headquartered in the couple's Newton home and saw considerable traffic from conservancy staffers and the five children of the combined families. It also ended a time when Munkenbeck could be confident of getting a full eight hours of shut-eye.

"She'll wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning and come up with three or four new ideas, and she'll try them out first on me because, before breakfast, the idea needs to express itself. I don't always get as much sleep as I'd like!" he said with a laugh.

A friend of the couple said he, too, enjoyed watching von Tscharnier constantly generate ideas. It wiped away his first lukewarm impression of "a very imposing, slightly imperious Swiss woman.

"And I was alarmed for fear that there wasn't a lot of 'give,' " said Thaddeus Beal, an artist and former lawyer from Somerville who has known Munkenbeck since the early 1970s. "It so delights me that when push comes to shove and she really has found something to get her teeth into, it turns out to be building a skateboard park on the river."

As of last week, the conservancy had raised \$641,000 toward the skate park's projected \$2 million cost, including a \$100,000 donation from the city of Boston, and an ongoing pledge from an anonymous donor to quadruple the donations of all skateboarders and bicycle motocross riders.

"Every day I'm learning something, and I'm doing things I've never done," von Tscharnier said. "I have never built a skate park; I have never raised that much money in my life. ... There's really not a typical day because I never quite know what's the next challenge."

Two concerts in Central Square in Cambridge to raise money for the skatepark are being held Saturday at 6 p.m. at the Central Square Elk Lodge, and March 30 at 9 p.m. at TT the Bear's Place. Will Kilburn can be reached at wkilburn@globe.com.

She champions the river, and skateboarders, too

Caption to picture:

Renata von Tscharnier, president of the Charles River Conservancy, stands on the East Cambridge riverbank where the group aims to build a \$2million skateboard park.

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