

## Searching for the lost rivers of Toronto



On Saturday our crew went on what was both a remarkable and unremarkable journey.

It was remarkable because we traced the path of one of Toronto's many lost creeks from head to tail. It was unremarkable because we spent the day driving and walking around, two activities that every urbanite does each day.

Our objective: to trace the path of Mud Creek from its suburban headwaters to where it meets the Don River and eventually flows into Toronto Harbour on Lake Ontario. I've walked city streets most of my life but never on the quest to find a lost creek.

Our journey began at 7:30 a.m. on Downsview Park, a wide grassy expanse crossed by a decommissioned airport runway that sits on the Northern part of Toronto. This was where Mud Creek began. Or did it?

Helen Mills, founder of Lost Rivers, a Toronto organization that traces the path of the city's lost creeks and rivers, circled the same clump of brush several times. Her and Alexandra's shadows stretched long and far in the slanted northern sunlight. On the third go around she turned to Alexandra.

"It's gone!" she exclaimed, eyes wide. "We have lost our headwater."

The idea for Lost Rivers first struck Helen in 1987 when she realized that the urban features she passed everyday in Toronto were reflections of a more organic form to the landscape. Underfoot was a webbing of lost creeks and rivers, paved over, dismantled, piped and disengaged from the hustle and bustle of city life. She had a vision to

paint the path of the city's lost creeks and rivers atop their concrete captors. Instead she painted them in the minds of the city's residents. So far Lost Rivers has taken more than 15,000 people on lost river walks.

It was an inauspicious start to this lost river's story (Helen clarified: "It's a very truthful start").

Next stop: Champlain heights where Mud Creek passes under the 401 Highway in a big culvert. Here, the blue water-soluble paint came out and Alexandra and Mills took paint brush to culvert in honor of Mills' original river painting concept. "Mud Creek" their label said. Above us the traffic roared.

Once done, we hopped in our cars to trace this lost creek's path as it wended its way through the city. Suffice to say that driving to follow a creek's path is a dizzying trip, especially when you're in pursuit of a certain Helen Mills, ex-car courier. Loop-de-loops, stop signs, strollers and traffic lights met us as we took what zig-zagged in what was largely, but not exclusively, southeast direction. As Ben said over the walkies: "Helen, you're a slippery driver. Over."

We came out at the Evergreen Brick Works, where a farmer's market was in full swing. Dogs, strollers, parents, a fiddler, they were all crowded under the main open building where chefs, farmers, cheese makers and fishmongers all sold their wares. Macintosh apples, crisp and juicy, plucked off the tree that morning, made our mouths water as we crunched through them.

It turns out that Mud Creek undergoes a bit of a renaissance at the Evergreen Brick Works. The LEED platinum building integrates sustainable water features throughout its site. There is the rainwater collection system that collects water from the sky and uses it to water the luscious garden and flush the many toilets. Then there are the four ponds that filter Mud Creek's storm water and provide habitat in the Don Valley Brick Works Park.

"When we urbanize rivers we take away how they operate. We've reorganized their processes and they don't work," Robert Plitt, Sustainability Manager at Evergreen Brick Works told Alexandra. The ponds in front of them are a testament to how natural features can be reintegrated into an urban environment. "Bringing nature back into cities, it's not that difficult if it's a priority," he said.

Below us the waters from mud creek, lost underneath the city, were found. "When you daylight creeks you bring back nature," said Plitt.

We weren't done quite yet. There was one last stop. We traipsed into the woods upstream from the Brick Works to find where Mud Creek emerges from the city's depth to be day lighted at its end. We followed the ravine up to where a seven foot high culvert was embedded in the ground. And out came the paint one last time.

"There's nothing like a little civil disobedience with water soluble paint," joked Alexandra.

Alexandra and Helen crouched on top of the discharge pipe painting it with fish and naming the creek for passersby. The sumac and maple leaves shone red and orange like flames licking the forest and the tart earthy smell of autumn hung in the air.

Alexandra asked Helen how it made her feel to finally take paintbrush to the city's culverts and drainage pipes and reclaim them blue.

"I think it's magic," she replied. "Don't you?"

<http://www.alexandracousteau.org/blog/searching-for-the-lost-rivers-of-toronto>