



**Kathleen Marks**

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When Kathleen Marks was a kid in North Carolina's Sandhills region, family trips to state forests and national parks gave her memories, a few mosquito bites and a lifelong desire to connect people with nature.

She started, appropriately enough, with kids. After college, Marks taught at Sunflower School, a Chapel Hill preschool that encourages kids to get creative outdoors. In Marks' favorite project, students used natural materials to design and build a 12-foot-tall giant, who now keeps watch over the playground.

In 2004, friend Mikki Sager recruited Marks to The Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities Program (RCP), which helps North Carolina's rural communities address persistent poverty by tapping natural resources to create jobs and strengthen economies. As associate director, Marks administers RCP's small grants program and leads efforts to coordinate partner training like RCP's Peer Learning Visits, in which partners share successes and challenges.

The best part of the job? For Marks, it's the people: "I'm consistently amazed at the incredible things our partners accomplish with few resources." As an example, she points to a project highlighted at RCP's 2009 Peer Learning Visit: To bolster the economy of rural Robbinsville, residents transformed a historic schoolhouse into the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center, which RCP helps support. The center attracts visitors and also serves the community with classes for all ages, an arts and crafts gallery, a commercial kitchen for local growers, live entertainment and more. Robbinsville now welcomes more than 10,000 visitors each year who come to experience the area's colorful heritage.

In fact, RCP has supported dozens of North Carolina communities like Robbinsville, awarding more than \$1.8 million in grants, leveraging \$18 million for partners, creating more than 300 jobs and training 5,000 leaders to date. But Marks says there's still much to do. Many of the state's rural communities struggle to stay afloat. RCP's "triple bottom line" approach—blending sustainable economic development, environmental stewardship and social justice—is needed today more than ever before.