



profitable conservation

Making a buck and tending to the environment are not necessarily at odds.

By Rosemary Waldorf | Photo by Briana Brough

■ Guenevere stands among the reeds of permanently protected land in Poole Farm.



Guenevere Abernathy has warm brown eyes, a sweet smile and better freckles than Opie. She's polite, thoughtful, low-key; It's not a stretch to call her a nice, Southern gal.

But don't be fooled that she's limited by those adjectives. She's also creative, entrepreneurial, tenacious and ambitious. Her story, past, present and, most likely, future, centers on her passion for three things, she says: land conservation, Durham and husband, Michael Lemanski.

Guenevere and Michael became sweethearts when they were 10th graders at Northern High School (class of 1991). "Our first date was the state fair. We had to bum a ride with some juniors old enough to drive. This fall is the 20th anniversary of our first date," she notes.

It's been a productive two decades. Guenevere and Michael are Durham-based developers and at age 35, already one of the city's most prominent young couples. They share an office — but work for different firms — at 101 West Main St. in downtown. Michael's well-known company, Greenfire Development, is invested in a \$300 million redevelopment series of projects that is transforming the city center. His commercial and residential properties and projects — from retail storefronts to lofts to office spaces to a planned hotel in the SunTrust building to the revitalization of Rogers Alley — are well known.

Less well known is Guenevere's complementary but independent business she has shared since 2005 with partner Jeff Fisher, the for-profit Unique Places, LLC, a conservation real estate firm that works to protect natural resources. Her journey to conservation entrepreneur began at UNC (class of 1995), where she majored in environmental policy and developed some firm views on ecotourism, among other hot-button topics. She put her energy into her ideals, working with various student environmental groups. Her interests in ecotourism led to independent studies in Ecuador and Costa Rica during her grad school years at N.C. State in the mid-1990s.

"My four-month stint in Costa Rica was too long," she now says. "But the experience did help me see the connections between land acquisition and water quality,

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between a high quality of life and a strong economy.”

After graduate school, Guenevere and Michael moved to Wisconsin, where he worked for Kimberly-Clarke. “I went kicking and screaming,” Guenevere recalls, “but I found my dream job with the Nature Conservancy in Door County. In my first five years, we made every project successful.” But the place was a little too perfect — “the Cape Cod of the Midwest,” she calls it. Also, she missed Durham.

“Durham is home. My great-grandmother lived on Buchanan Street. My mother and brother still live in Rougemont. My grandmother taught at Mangum when it was first grade through 12th grade.

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Renaissance Center across from the Streets at Southport

"We saw opportunity here. American Tobacco and West Village had taken off, but nobody was doing anything in the city center."

Guenevere became director of Land Protection and Stewardship for Triangle Land Conservancy. That experience showed her a niche in the market that Unique Places could fill. "Sometimes the land trusts lose projects because they need more time to put the money together," she says. "I saw a way to complement their work — to attract investors to land with high conservation value, such as scenic views, water quality and wildlife habitat."

Poole Farm, in northern Durham County, is a Unique Places success story. Near Buffalo Creek, a tributary to the Little River, Poole Farm had been designated a preservation priority, but the five sisters who owned the farm could not wait for the county to secure public funding. In 2005, the 107-acre tract was on the market for \$800,000 and attracting developers' interest.

Unique Places raised funds, worked with the county, put the land under contract and figured out how to meet Durham's environmental goals and create marketable homesites.

The result: 89 acres of permanently protected open space in the Little River watershed, farmland protected by a farm easement,

Buffalo Creek bottomland protected by a water quality easement, six marketable homesites and a satisfied investor.

Guenevere emphasizes that Unique Places is a long-term business, not just a holding company for a deal or two. "From investigating projects to finishing them and selling homesites, we typically have 16 to 20 projects underway. We are always looking, and we function as conservation consultants as well as developers."

Guenevere and Michael are approaching a new phase in their Durham story. They plan to move from their 1940s ranch house in Watts-Hillandale to a condominium in the Kress Building. "We like the edginess of Durham. For us, it sparks the creative side," Guenevere says. "There's a great network of people interested in sustainability and creativity. The energy builds on itself. The local food movement, farmers' markets, biodiesel. People here do it. This blend of social consciousness and entrepreneurial spirit is very cool." **DM**

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