

Triangle Land Conservancy gets \$1 million bequest from open-space activist

By Martha Quillin
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Hildegard Ryals, who worked so hard on local land conservation projects in her lifetime, made sure the Triangle Land Conservancy could carry on her vision after her death with a \$1 million gift.

Chad Jemison, executive director of the Durham-based TLC, said Ryals' was the largest cash bequest the agency has received since it was formed in 1983. The money, recently distributed from Ryals' estate, will be invested, Jemison said, "to support conservation work in the Triangle for years to come."

Ryals died in 2012 at the age of 81.

She was a native of Philadelphia who moved to Durham in 1972 with her husband, then a professor of English at Duke University. She became friends with Margaret Nygard, a longtime proponent of the Eno River, and worked with her and others to protect the river's watershed.

Ryals later founded the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee in the 1980s to work on preserving land along the creek that ran through four jurisdictions: Orange County, Chapel Hill, Durham County and the City of the Durham."

She was really looking ahead," said Robert Healy, professor emeritus of environmental policy at Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment, and co-chair of the New Hope Creek Advisory Committee. Ryals knew that growth was coming to the New Hope corridor and that the creek, which feeds into Jordan Lake, a future drinking-water source, would need to be protected before development got there. Not only was she passionate about the work of protecting open space, but she drew others into to it as well, Healy said."

Hildegard had a way of telling each person she encountered that unless they acted to protect the environment, things would simply fall apart," he said. "She convinced you that if you didn't do it – you, personally – that it would not happen, and it was important."

You had no counterargument. You just had to do it."

One of Ryals' signature accomplishments was the Durham County Inventory of Natural and Cultural Resources, and she was instrumental in establishing Leigh Farm Park and Little River Regional Park and Natural Area, both in Durham. Jemison said Ryals understood the importance of open space where people and nature have a chance to regenerate. The TLC has worked with landowners, developers, governments, the public and other nonprofits to preserve more than 15,000 acres of land in six counties.

As a community grows, "Open space is really an important piece of the infrastructure, a really basic element that a growing metropolitan area needs to address," Jemison said.