High-profile help for Calusa Waterkeeper: K.C. Schulberg brings savvy, starpower to scrappy nonprofit

Amy Bennett Williams, Fort Myers News-Press  Published 4:06 p.m. ET Aug. 3, 2018

The scrappy nonprofit battling for the Caloosahatchee just got turbocharged.

International businessman and activist K.C. Schulberg stepped to the helm of Calusa Waterkeeper this week as executive director, bringing a sterling Hollywood pedigree and fundraising firepower to the group, which spent the first two decades of its existence as a next-to-no budget, all-volunteer outfit with a couple of different names: Caloosahatchee Riverwatch and Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association.

Now, Calusa Waterkeeper has emerged as the voice of the beleaguered river, especially in a summer of unprecedented malaise when the Caloosahatchee and its watershed are suffocating in toxic algae. That’s on top of its chronic handicaps.

Maimed by unnatural engineering, and fouled by regular infusions of polluted Lake Okeechobee water, the 67-mile-long river delivers regular doses of woe to its shoreline cities and tourism-powered barrier islands in its estuary.

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But desperate times have a way of revealing champions, and in recent years, the small band of advocates has battled for the river against daunting odds. Coaxed from retirement and named “Waterkeeper” two years ago, biologist John Cassani has become the go-to resource for the ongoing crisis, sharing the river’s predicament with the world via the New York Times, the Associated Press, and European media outlets.

Now Cassani will be joined by the energetically affable Schulberg, who’ll focus on organizing and rainmaking while Cassani does the hands-on science and watchdogging.
Neither of them is doing it for the money. Cassani’s annual salary is $15,000, while Schulberg’s is $25,000, which skirts Florida’s poverty line.

So what convinced the 66-year-old Schulberg to step into the fray? His extraordinary resume includes a teenaged stint as marshal for Martin Luther King’s Poor Peoples’ Campaign and first March on Washington, a hand in more than 200 movies, mini-series and television movies and running his own international production and marketing companies to join the nonprofit?

Love has a lot to do with it.

The French-born Schulberg first fell for south Florida when he was 5. His father, director/producer Stuart Schulberg and Oscar-winning uncle, Budd Schulberg, whose “On the Waterfront” starred Marlon Brando, came to Everglades City to film “Wind Across the Everglades” for Warner Brothers. One of the first major studio-produced environmental films, it was, Schulberg says, “a very curious movie.”

More: Lake Okeechobee algae bloom captured in NOAA satellite image Thursday

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Starring Burl Ives and Christopher Plummer in his first feature film, it was also Peter Falk’s first movie along with “a very strange cast of characters,” Schulberg says, “with Gypsy Rose Lee, who arrived in Everglades City in 1956 to prep the movie in a pink Cadillac with 22 cats. It was just such an outlandish thing, but they made this movie with Nicholas Ray, a very famous Hollywood director who did ‘Rebel without a Cause.’ ”

The film was about an underdog, a game warden, played by Plummer, going head-to-head with plume hunter Burl Ives. “It was about the embattled Audubon Society who was trying to stem the poaching of endangered birds at the turn of the last century,” Schulberg says. “For women, the craze at the time was the plumes on hats (and) the result was that whole species of birds were being wiped out.”

Calusa Waterkeeper has been a bit of an underdog as well, “punching above their weight class for years,” Schulberg says. “They stretch their resources. They do amazing work. They’re out in the wilderness. I think they could use some help. I have a skill set. It’s far from perfect,” he says, “but I think I can lend some help ... give them a bigger platform.”

His community organizing chops are formidable. For the last two years, the Collier County resident has helped lead Collier Freedom, the nonprofit that put together the first Naples Women’s March, the first Naples Pride 5k and many other environmental workshops, demonstrations and conferences focusing on healthcare, immigration, racial justice, LGBTQ rights and more, Schulberg says.

Waterkeeper president Gene Gibson says the nonprofit is thrilled Schulberg has joined them to “build awareness, raise funds, create events and generally expand the organization’s reach and profile.”
First up, an event that calls on Schulberg’s film background and advocacy acumen: the screening of award-winning documentary, “Toxic Puzzle,” narrated by Harrison Ford on Aug. 14 at the Broadway Palm in Fort Myers. Following an introduction by Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen, R-Fort Myers, the film explores the correlation between toxic algae and neurological diseases. It will be followed by a panel discussion with Cassani and three nationally esteemed research scientists in the field moderated by Rae Ann Wessel of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.

The event is just another step, Schulberg says, on the road toward resurrecting the river.

“This beautiful body of water is damaged, impaired, toxic sometimes, dangerous sometimes. There has to be work done to inform the public about that, to fix some of the regulatory problems to the extent we can, to hold people accountable,” he says. “But we also want to get the good news out. That it’s a beautiful body of water and we’re going to try to return it to its pristine state so the people can enjoy it.”

If you go

What: “Toxic Puzzle,” followed by a panel discussion

When: 5:30 Tuesday, Aug. 14

Where: Broadway Palm Theatre, 1380 Colonial Blvd., Fort Myers

Cost: $10

Info, buy tickets: Call 239-278-4422; online: https://broadwaypalm.com/shows/toxic-puzzle/

KC Schulberg

Born: Paris France

Lives: Naples, Florida

Married: One daughter

Education: BFA from Carnegie Mellon University Drama Conservatory, Degree in Theatre Directing.

Current title: Executive Director, Calusa Waterkeeper

Learn more: calusawaterkeeper.org